

Swept Away

Living without a home is deadly in Silicon Valley. One SCU professor explores why so many die in a place of such wealth and finds the constant removal of communities of homeless people may be a danger to their lives.

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SILICON VALLEY IS a particularly deadly place to be poor.

We produce many things here. A flood of information in zeroes and ones pulsing through cables beneath our feet. Bright ideas that change the course of history. A plethora of millionaires living in million-dollar two-bed, one-bath homes. And, by the edges of our rivers and waterways, some of the worst inequality in the world.

In 2019, more than 9,700 people in Santa Clara County had no home by a definition that most can agree on. They live in communities of RVs and cars, in tents or under a tarp slung between trees, in doorways or on park benches. In a county with about 1.9 million people, that means that more than one in 200 residents sleep without a proper roof overhead every night.

People living without housing in the Valley are more likely to die than people living on the streets anywhere else in the U.S. Yes, if you're unhoused, you're more likely to die here than in frigidly cold New York or Chicago. You're more likely to die here than in searing hot Texas or Arizona.

Nationally, people without homes have life spans 12 years shorter than those with homes, according to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council. In her research, Santa Clara University public health Assistant Professor **Jamie Chang** notes the disparity in the Valley is much worse: Homeless people in Santa Clara County live, on average, 30 years fewer than their housed peers.

The number of deaths here has increased significantly in recent years—more than quadrupling between 2011-2021 to 250 deaths, according to Santa Clara County coroner's office data.

To die without a home is to die in part because of homelessness, says Chang. The lack of health care and stresses on the body and mind that come with existing without a home add up.

“This is an emergency,” says Phil Mastrocola '71. “We need to treat it like an emergency. It is a life-or-death thing. And until we treat it that way, nothing will change.”

In Chang's effort to understand the deaths of our homeless neighbors, she mapped a decade of them. All the joy and sadness and experience of a human life condensed into a little orange dot on a screen. Why is it so deadly in Silicon Valley, where there is so much wealth?

Understanding these lives—and the public health failures that resulted in such early ends—is central to Chang's work.

Zoom into the map. Here is a Silicon Valley strip mall—with a Target, Panda Express, and a dozen or so Tesla charging stations where cars costing more than \$80,000 can refuel. Across the street, along the banks of the Guadalupe River where the first Mission Santa Clara de Asís was founded, three orange dots appear. Here are a series of encampments—including one where Chang and her students work to understand the lives and deaths of the people who live without homes in Silicon Valley.

According to Chang's analysis, each dot is likely a man who died in his 50s rather than his 80s. Heart attacks and diabetes are common causes of death. Accidents and overdoses are also frequent.

Most of the deaths are preventable, Chang says, with better access to care. Insulin treats most diabetics, for example. But it's hard to get regularly, let alone affordably, for people living on the edges of society.

Not all of the dots on Chang's map represent 50-something men. There are two infants represented there—a boy and a girl, each under a year old. And a pair of toddlers under 3 years old. Another dot was a 91-year-old man who died without a home in 2017.

Chang's research includes hours working with students and others to interview and listen to those who live without homes. It gets us closer to understanding why so many die on Silicon Valley's byways and riverbanks. Because of that work, for the first time, there is evidence drawing a line between how we respond to homelessness and such outcomes.

Each death represents a societal failing, Chang says. She has lost loved ones to homelessness, but it doesn't require a personal tragedy to care. “Looking around our very own communities, I am sickened that we have constructed a society that lets people suffer, languish, and die in extreme poverty,” she says. “It's wrong—it's that simple. All of us are the architects of this injustice, unless we actively work to counter it.”

HOW WE GOT HERE

“This is an emergency,” says **Phil Mastrocola '71**, who operates a shelter out of Grace Baptist Church in downtown San Jose. “We need to treat it like an emergency. It is a life-or-death thing. And until we treat it that way, nothing will change.”

About a dozen SCU religious studies students have gathered outside the dark brown church. As the students tour the sanctuary and file down a hallway behind Mastrocola, associate professor of religious studies **Phillip Boo Riley** asks big questions: How do we treat people who are outsiders with dignity? How do we create community? Riley has spent decades helping people without homes. This spring, his students teamed up with students in Chang's class to understand the humanity behind the health crisis on Silicon Valley's streets. He is a co-author on her most recent study, “Harms of encampment abatements on the health of unhoused people” in *Qualitative Research in Health*. During the tour, a volunteer recalls washing the feet of homeless people suffering from trench foot—a condition where the skin breaks down because the feet don't get a chance to dry out after becoming wet—Riley reminds students of class readings that the poor embody Christ in a special way. “God is present in these diseased feet,” he says.

The group settles into chairs on a basketball court in the back of the church. Cots are stacked on a stage at one end. The walls are lined with banners declaring “God Is Love.”

This gym, Mastrocola tells Riley's class, started as a space for college students to play basketball—a way for the church to welcome the neighboring community in. By the 1970s, the congregation put it to a different use. It operated as a day center for people who had moved into halfway homes from state institutions under then-California Gov. Ronald Reagan's underfunded plan to shift mental health care from state facilities to community ones.

Over the years, Mastrocola says, the population using the center began to change—and fewer of them had homes.



The church would let them pitch tents on its lawn.

At one point, a new preacher arrived. “He said, ‘Why are those people sleeping on the lawn in tents?’” Mastrocola tells the students. Because they have nowhere to go, was the answer. “But why aren't they sleeping inside?” he asked.

And with that, the old gym became an overnight shelter. Today about 30 people sleep there each evening, mostly men. Women tend to avoid shelters, Mastrocola says, preferring the safety of known communities. Before COVID, the number of guests here was 60. Volunteers from the Catholic Worker House in downtown, Casa de Clara, help.

What happened at Grace is a microcosm of what happened all over California, says Riley.

The population grew. People had babies. Others moved here, as people do, drawn by family ties, job opportunities, or good weather. But the number of houses being built in the state didn't keep up.

Between the 1940s and the 1960s, there were about three new Californians per new home built, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Today for every five new residents, only one new home is built. Over time, those annual gaps accumulated into a yawning deficit. According to a 2016 report by auditing firm McKinsey, there are 358 houses, apartments, condos, or other homes per 1,000 people in the state.

The mismatch between need and availability sent housing prices—and the cost of living—ever higher, making it easier for people to find themselves without.

In Silicon Valley, where tech salaries continue to drive up rents and fund bidding wars on the homes that do exist, the disparities are even more significant than elsewhere in California. There are many paths to homeless here—most people on the streets are from the area, and a single blow

like medical debt, divorce, or job loss can be catastrophic.

“It seems even more pressing in one of the richest parts of the world to have 10,000 people experiencing homelessness,” says **Cassandra Staff MBA '11**, strategic initiatives director at Destination: Home, one of Santa Clara County's most prominent nonprofits serving people without homes.

Even as more people became housing insecure, meaning homeless or unsure of their ability to pay for housing, the number of emergency shelters didn't grow to catch them. In 2019 in Santa Clara County, there was temporary shelter for fewer than 2,000 people, but 9,706 people were living without housing, according to a county report.

That gap is one **Malisha Kumar '99, MBA '17** knows deeply. She helped create the Here4You Call Center at the Bill Wilson Center, a nonprofit that supports homeless children and young adults, where she works to match people in need of housing with resources. Often when people call, particularly if it is late in the day, there are no shelter beds to direct them toward.

“I try to keep them on the phone,” she says, to help them run through potential other solutions to their crisis. “Do they have a friend they can stay with tonight? A family member?” A few nights of those solutions can provide enough time for some people on the cusp of homelessness to regain their footing. Others can wait on the county's list for housing for as long as seven years. People wait for shelter that may never come, activists say.

“Our shelter system is over capacity. We don't have safe parking systems. We don't have managed encampments,” says Andy Gutierrez, a public defender in Santa Clara County. “All we have are unsanctioned, unsafe encampments and waiting for the golden ticket.”



INCREASING VISIBILITY

The rivers and streams of Santa Clara County are probably what first encouraged people to settle here. From the Ohlone to the Spanish, settling along waterways like Coyote Creek and the Guadalupe River meant access to fish, fresh water, and the San Francisco Bay.

The waters continue to be a draw today, despite long periods of drought. Just as before, the rivers and creeks attract egrets, ducks, and other waterfowl. And just as in the past, people are drawn to the creeks and rivers as a safe place to make a home. Some pitch tents. Others build complete structures out of found materials, including wood or tarps, along the riverbanks.

In 2014, the largest such community in Santa Clara County was evicted from the banks of Coyote Creek by the actions of another group interested in the region's waterways: The California Department of Fish and Wildlife. The department had complained to regional water officials that human waste and garbage were polluting the water. Bay-keeper, an environmental group, filed a lawsuit, suggesting waste from the encampment was a hazard to salmon and trout that spawn in Coyote Creek.

That winter, the community living by the creek was "swept"—i.e., removed by officials with little to offer residents in the way of alternate housing. People gathered what belongings they could carry. The rest was hauled to the dump. The sweep made news around the world—perhaps one of the nation's highest-profile abatement projects, as the dismantling of homeless encampments is known.

And it seemed overnight that the people who had lived in

a long-established, alibet makeshift, community on the riverbanks became more visible. People moved onto the steep embankments of highways, into parks, and elsewhere. This came, Chang and Riley write, as the kinds of technology made in Silicon Valley—cellphones and apps—began to make it easier for people to report and complain about the encampments that seemed, suddenly, to be everywhere.

Rather than solutions for these displaced people, the response to those complaints has been more sweeps. And that may be what's driving poor health outcomes and deaths in Santa Clara County's homeless population, according to interviews Chang and her students conducted as part of a course on qualitative research.

WHAT'S GONE WRONG

"They come first thing in the morning," says Lee Clark of his experiences being swept in encampment abatements in Santa Clara County. He had lived on the streets of Santa Clara County for five years before finding his footing again. "They tell you to move on—and you could lose everything."

He remembers a bike that he adored and lost in a sweep. He had been in jail for trespassing at the time. Such imprisonment is common for people without homes, according to research by Santa Clara Law students working with Professor **Michelle Oberman**. When Lee was released, the community he had depended on near the Guadalupe River was gone—and so were his bike and socks. Reflecting back on those experiences he can see the high price of being without a home.

"Trauma," Clark says. "I've taken community college

courses, and one of the things I learned about is the health effects of trauma. And that just hit me. There is so much trauma out there.

"After every sweep, you have to rebuild. And you have no way to get anything. I have high blood pressure, and I just kept losing my medication. I think you see a lot of people out there who are talking to themselves or walking in and out of traffic, and I think that it is just stress. It's their brains' way of trying to protect them from the trauma. I feel so lucky to have made it out."

Clark is one of the lucky few. Now, he has a small apartment and works for the homeless outreach group PATH. But his story of homelessness echoes what Chang's student researchers heard in their interviews.

A woman, a veteran who had struggled with addiction and lost her only child when he was an infant, told interviewers in the study that she lost her only photo of her boy in a sweep.

Another told researchers of sweeps as frequent as every two weeks. City officials and police would post a notice that the area was to be cleared in 72 hours—or sometimes they wouldn't post at all—and as in Clark's story, they would arrive at dawn. "A few times they came and wiped out everything of everybody's," the woman says. "Clothes, food... It didn't matter what it was. If you had it there, they took everything. Tents. Then you were left with no clothes, no food, nowhere to stay, no blankets or anything."

Sweeps mean people lose the means to survive. To avoid such abatements, people move to increasingly dangerous locations, with tents popping up in the middle of clover-leaf highway on-ramps.

One woman told interviewers that she prefers to sleep just feet away from heavy freight trains to avoid losing her belongings—and community. Complicated jurisdictional rules sometimes make it harder to remove encampments next to train tracks.

Chang believes there may be a connection between what they learned from unhoused people about abatements and the increasing numbers of dead in Santa Clara County.

While sweeps or abatements aren't regularly reported, she and Riley note that the San Jose city auditor estimates sweeps increased more than 11-fold between 2013 and 2018, a timeframe during which homeless deaths increased by 75 percent.

In 2019, Chang and Riley write, San Jose spent about \$8.5 million responding to encampments. More than half of that money, 57 percent, went to sweeps, 10 percent to outreach, and 17 percent to deterrence such as fencing.

As sweeps increase, unhoused people just build new encampments that are now farther out of sight of outreach workers bringing food and medicine and closer to dangers like trains or potential flooding. Continual sweeps also make the communities less trusting of authority, Chang says, as interactions with police and other public workers now center on loss rather than gaining anything.

A NEIGHBORHOOD

Years ago, there used to be a neighborhood—a real one with cement driveways and cul-de-sacs—along the Guadalupe River just north of downtown San Jose. It was the kind of suburban block-scape that replaced many of the South Bay's old fruit orchards.

About 30 years ago, the neighborhood was razed. The nearby municipal airport, today's Mineta International, needed more space. The Federal Aviation Administration needed to be sure planes could safely land in an emergency. Collectively, these parcels, now bereft of formal housing but

still including a grid of streets, is a smart place for a crash landing.

Even without houses, another community moved in. The official count suggests that at least 200 people call this space home, but a quick tour through the area suggests many more live here. RVs, tents, cars, and trucks fill the otherwise abandoned neighborhood. This new community, of course, isn't called a neighborhood. It's considered an encampment.

It's a temporary one, too. The FAA does not like people living in its emergency landing zone. Since October 2021, the encampment has been slowly swept. Officials put up concrete barriers in the old intersections to keep the unhoused neighbors from returning to areas that have already been swept. The encampment is supposed to be removed entirely by the beginning of summer.

The area is slated to be reclaimed as a park—a long-planned project that includes 16 acres for disc golf. Already, portions reflect this planned use—not for housing but recreation. A rarely used ball field hosts a church outreach group on weekends. A community garden flourishes. Sunflowers stand tall. Healthy-looking chard, tomato, and squash plants are safely behind a fence with a locked gate.

Chang's and Riley's classes came to the river encampment. To prepare for their research, Chang's students joined the nonprofit Agape and Silicon Valley Interreligious Council as they marked Mahatma Gandhi's birthday by distributing food to those without homes.

Girshbhai Shah, a volunteer who helped organize the event with the Arham Yuva Seva Group, a global NGO, shared his inspiration: "Nonviolence is not a not doing. It is a call to positive action," he says. "To see someone in need of help and not helping is an act of violence."

As the volunteers split into groups and gathered meals to share with those they met, SCU senior **Georgia Bright '22** looked forward to getting started. "It's easy enough to be caught up in the numbers," she says. "This is a chance to meet people and to learn about them. There's such a lack of information."

That's a problem Chang hopes her research will help solve. Weeks later, the students from her class venture out to start their interviews, equipped with a better understanding of those they will meet through Chang's work in the classroom and the volunteering experience. Some are hiking down to the river. Others work at picnic benches. Students in groups of three interview people about their experiences living without a home.

Planes roar overhead. Birds squawk in the brush. Somewhere an electric rental scooter beeps. A man nearly as young as the students leans forward to listen to the group's questionnaire. He's answering in exchange for a gift card.

How is he? "So far, so good," he says. "I wake up every day." He put down a jug of water by his feet when he sat down to be interviewed and accepted a cup of coffee. He tells the students that finding drinking water is difficult. He goes to water fountains to fill up and carries as much as he can back here to his home near the river. He graduated from college, he tells them, but now he's not sure how to get back to that world.

A woman holding flip-flops in one hand and a diapered toddler in her other arm comes up the sidewalk. She surveys the scene. Not worth the hassle, it seems, because she puts the child down, and together they head back toward the river—back home. At least, until spring sweeps them away again.