

Crystal meth, the drug of choice on Skid Row.

Los Angeles is the epicenter of the current homeless crisis in the US. Due to a combination of factors, such as the rising costs of living, the Covid-crisis and illegal immigration, the numbers have hit a ten year record. According to numbers from Housing and Urban Development (HUD), there are 600,000 homeless nationwide. More than ten percent, 65,000 people, live in Los Angeles and are staying in tents and flimsy structures all over town: At the exits and entrances of the freeways, under most bridges, in the upscale Echo Park, at the boardwalk of Venice Beach. Ground zero of the crisis is Skid Row.

This area in downtown LA has now become a tent city for sixty blocks where approximately 8,000 homeless are camping out. A few blocks to the north is Broadway, where in the good old days festive premiers were staged in elegant theaters. It is also the location of the Bradbury Building, where the notorious scenes of the dystopian science fiction movie Blade Runner were shot. The futuristic nightmarish scenario seems to have become reality with thousands of paupers shuffling in garbage strewn streets against the backdrop of shiny skyscrapers from the financial district a few blocks away.

The most miserable cases are severe mentally ill patients who crawl around naked, defecate on the streets wherever they want and whenever they need, meanwhile screaming against the air waving with clenched fists, Many homeless lay in a *contorted* composure on the pavement in the burning sun, A pungent odor of rotten trash, urine and marijuana, legalized a few years ago in California, drifts in the streets. Other people are just staring apathetically in front of them, narcotized by the many drugs that are readily available. Crack used to be the favorite drug for the down and out with a street price of three dollars, but crystal meth has become drug *numero uno* for the absolute underclass.

‘It is Chris versus Crack, and Chris is winning,’ explains Holly, a Skid Row resident. The difference is that the high of crack lasts only 15 minutes. A small portion of crystal meth will work half a day. An attractive price/quality ration for most people. “With crack, you can check out in three days. With meth, you never check out.” Holly knows what he is talking about since he loves now and then a good hit of crack. “Crack is one shoe off, one shoe on. Chris is both shoes gone.” he expresses animated.

An estimated 80 percent of Skid Row uses crystal meth. It can be smoked, in the typical glass pipes with a bowl at the end. But it can also be injected and snorted, Small consumer portions are available for 5 dollars, sometimes even less, according to Scotty, a heavy user. He shows me how easy it is to ‘score a nickel’, slang for procuring narcotics worth five dollars. He walks to a tent and shouts out a name, hears a reply and sticks five singles through an opening at the entrance of the tent. A man appears, and he discretely, he leaves a few crumbles wrapped in some plastic on a chair and walks as inconspicuously as possible away. Scotty picks up his order. The whole transactions lasted less than a minute. Many crystal meth users finance their own consumption by dealing themselves, so through a snowball effect use is spreading like wildfire,

Scotty has another source of income. “*I slam three dime a day,*” he explains, meaning he injects thirty dollars worth of crystal meth. It is called ‘slamming’ because the effect is so overwhelming powerful, like throwing a door shut with great force. Scotty goes every morning at 8.30 to the needle exchange on Fifth Street to get clean syringes. The word ‘exchange’ suggest that you have to hand in a used needle to get a clean one. But is not that way. The volunteer knows Scotty by name, wishes him a good morning and gives him a brown bag. Scotty is so polite a to look for a discrete location to set his shot, but many other clients just slam and smoke up on the pavement in front of the needle exchange.

Further down the street on a quiet spot, Scotty shows the content of the bag. Forty syringes, alcohol to disinfect and straps to bind off your arms, so your veins will swell making it easier to inject. Scotty himself uses daily five, six syringes at the most. The remaining ones he sells for one dollar a piece so he can pay for his own use. Another hustle is selling the water bottles that volunteers and organizations hand out to the homeless. Scotty sells three small bottles for one dollar to sketchy stores, that resell them for one dollar a piece.

Scotty’s meth use goes back a long way. He used to be stationed with the army in Germany. There he made his own crystal meth, using the so-called Czech method, with ephedrine, iodine and phosphorus. He made thousands of Deutschmarks every month and proudly brags how he was never caught. Scotty had long terms plans and saved his illegally obtained funds so he could start a company in construction tools once back in the US. He was able control his crystal meth addiction since he drank one case of beer a day, he explains. His life began to unravel when his wife got cancer. The chemotherapy did not work and he lost his wife. He lost control over his drinking, his company went broke and he took up using crystal meth. Three years ago, he washed

up on Skid Row. He must have been a strong and impressive man. Now he is emaciated and has scars all over his arms from shooting up. He used to be addicted to heroin, but, according to him, thanks to crystal meth, he was able to kick his heroin habit. Initially, Scotty used to smoke meth, but a girl introduced him to slamming and he noticed the experience is way more intense. “When I slam ten dollars, I get spontaneous and orgasm,” he smiles. “Awesome.”

He has bloody crusts on his skull, a fight or maybe he fell on the streets. His last tooth is grayish and sticks out between his dry lips in a face cleaved by sharp wrinkles. He complains he is suffering from tweakers. These are imaginary animals that users feel crawling under their skin. It is a common psychosis after years of intense meth consumption. That’s why heavy meth users scratch their skin open and get sores on their face and arms. “Everyone tries to sell the strongest dope,” Scotty says. “Dealers mix meth with fentanyl, to make it even more potent.” Fentanyl is a synthetic opiate, artificial heroine, but 50 times stronger. A dose of two milligrams, can be fatal. It is produced by Mexican cartels, but can also be imported straight from China in what some see as chemical warfare against the West. Authorities as well as users notice and increase of meth laced with fentanyl. This way, it is even harder for an addict to stop using because on top of the psychological dependency, there will be physical withdrawal symptoms, such as fever and diarrhea, normally experienced by heroin users when they quit cold turkey.

Public drug use.

Nearly 20 years ago, in 2003, I photographed extensively on Skid Row. The difference was that the area was much smaller and less filthy. Also, crystal meth had not yet appeared on the scene. The favorite drugs of choice were alcohol and crack. And most homeless did not consume out in the open. Jimmy, a homeless alcoholic I used to hang out with, drank his giant bottle of malt liquor very discretely out of a paper bag.

These days, everybody is smoking crack or meth without any restraint out in the open. In 2020 liberal California adopted *proposition 47* in which many crimes where no longer felonies, Shop lifting of goods worth less than 950 USD is no longer a felony but a misdemeanor. Possession and use of hard drugs is also decriminalized, Back in the old days, the police could arrest someone for smoking crack in the open. Now, the police ignore public consumption. Advocates of the new legislature argue that the new law no longer punishes users and puts them behind bars where they don’t belong since they are actually patients, not criminals. Opponents say that *Proposition 47* has

lifted the taboo on hard drugs and that together with legalization of marijuana has resulted in an enormous increase of drug use. Skid Row has dozens of head shops where people can buy fancy glass water pipes and other paraphernalia to use drugs.

Happy

“When I smoke crystal meth, I feel happy,” says Nancy, a black woman, while she puffs on a meth pipe and blows out large clouds of white smoke. Her use has been constant for three years, she claims, only half a gram a day. Some users can limit consumption to a gram a week and keep it that way. But most people see their meth use increase through habituation. At the end, they wind up using a few grams a day. Nancy lounges on a couch against a wall, a quiet private space fenced off by a tarp one side, a tent at the other. The street side is blocked by an old piano on which Rodney, an old white man with a big beard, plays Hotel California.

This is a street corner on Los Angeles Street and Third Street where a few people live together in a small community. Rodney is a former musician from Virginia. He says the tour bus of his band accidentally burned out and all equipment of the band went up in flames. Rodney lost his income, went broke and subsequently homeless. On Skid Row they have found an old, discarded piano that they have dragged to their corner. People playing on it provide rare instances of peace and beauty in this filthy and harsh environment.

Justin is a white man in his late twenties. He is addicted to heroin, and is trying to kick the habit through methadone. He has two small axes that he keeps razor sharp with a grinding stone. “I am happy for an attacker that I never had to use them,” he remarks matter-of-factly. Often, I see him during the day sleeping in his recliner chair, or maybe he is just passed out from a dose of drugs. Anthony, a black veteran, lives two tents down. He used to be a heavy crack and coke user, but he says he ‘got fed up to finance fancy cars’ from dealers. “I decided to keep my money where it belongs. In my pocket.” Anthony works around the corner in a small department store as stock manager. “I don’t like to hang around unemployed. God gave me a healthy and strong body.” Every day he finishes working at 6 pm and comes home with a can of food for the runaway cat the group adopted as pet.

Anthony not only has a soft spot for animals. He keeps an extra tent as an emergency shelter for women, the most vulnerable group on Skid Row. One example is Anna, a woman of Afghan descent, with a proud, noble and remarkable beautiful face. She uses a lot of crystal meth, she

admits. Most of the time, it is impossible to have a simple conversation with her. One time I see her, she has smeared white paint from a big pot on her legs and face. Another time she is peacefully sleeping on a mattress near the piano, all her belongings in a shopping cart. Her hand is wrapped in clothing, a nasty infection that doesn't go away. Rodney implores her to consult a doctor. It might get worse and even become gangrene, he says. But she dismisses his concerns. On my last day, she has put a silvery makeup on her face. With the top of a fishing rod, she lifts the veil she has put on top of her head. She points at her new friend, a young hippie with a beard who is meditating in a buddha like composure next to her shopping cart.

Granite table top

Reverend Andy Bales is the passionate director of the United Rescue Mission (URM), one of the biggest and oldest shelters on Skid Row. It can house one thousand people. But because of the Covid-crisis, the capacity is reduced to one-third. Because of a double amputation, Bales is in a wheel chair. He once cut his leg on the filthy streets on Skid Row and developed a streptococci infection that eventually turned into gangrene. His leg had to be amputated. His remaining leg became overstressed and developed complications and it had to be amputated as well.

Bales is a straight talker. "Local gangs control the streets," he says. "They control the market for crystal meth that comes from the Mexican cartels. But if you denounce the gangs, liberals accuse you of stigmatizing them." It went further as accusations. Bales was actually threatened by gang members who showed up at the doorstep of the URM.

Bales is a staunch critic of the city's homeless policy. The city decided to build housing units for the homeless. In the end, of the 10,000 apartments promised, only 800 materialized, for a price of half a million each. "Everything that doesn't have a granite counter top is considered unacceptable. The talk is about harm reduction, but nobody talks about consumption reduction. Interference in alcohol and drug abuse is considered an intrusion of privacy. But actually, it means 'let the daily death show run its course.' Shelters are considered inhumane. Yes, they are not ideal. But we are discussing a humanitarian emergency. It is a deadly philosophy to insist on constructing expensive apartments that in reality will never be built."

"This is a crisis we have not seen before," Bales continues. "People are dying on the streets. Nearly one thousand homeless die every year in the city. We have seen cases of bubonic plague, of typhoid fever, of resistant tuberculosis strains. Hepatitis C is increasing. The mentally ill roam

freely. Criminal violence is on the increase, we are losing the gang war. Evil is becoming more creative. Dealers not only mix fentanyl in meth, but lace reefer with bug spray and brake fluid to make it more potent. This has to stop.”

Thanks to tireless advocates like Bales, the Federal Government realized the severity of the crisis. Last April, Washington DC ruled that by October, the city must vacate Skid Row and provide alternative housing. The city government appealed last July against this verdict. This year will be decisive for Skid Row.

Teun Voeten is a war photographer and a cultural anthropologist. He wrote books on the underground homeless in New York, the drug violence in Mexico and is currently working on a book on global trends in crystal meth that will appear next year in the Netherlands.