

P H O T O E S S A Y

DIVISION STREET

*Photographs by Robert Gumpert
Introduction by Rebecca Solnit*





Chances are that you are living the good life, at least in the most fundamental sense. You have the liberty to leave your home and the security of a home you can return to; privacy and protection on the one hand and work, pleasure, social encounter, exploration, and engagement on the other. This is almost a definition of quality of life, the balance of public and private, the confidence that you have a place in the world—or a place and the world.

In the years since the Reagan revolution, this basic condition of well-being has become unavailable to millions in the United States: the unhoused and the imprisoned. The former live in an outside without access to the inside that is shelter, home, and stability; the latter live in an inside without access to the outside that is liberty. Both suffer a chronic lack of privacy and agency.

Their ranks are vast, including 2.2 million prisoners and, at any given time, about half a million people without homes. These people are regarded as disposable; prison and the streets are the places to which they've been disposed. Prison and the streets. The two are closely related, and they feed

each other in the general manner of vicious circles, as the photographer Robert Gumpert knows from shooting in both arenas. Prisoners exit with few resources to integrate themselves back into the world of work and housing, which sometimes leads them straight onto the street. People living on the street are often criminalized for their everyday activities, which can put them in prison. In San Francisco, local laws ban sitting or lying down on sidewalks and sleeping in public parks, as well as public urination and defecation—doing the things you do inside your house, the things biology requires that we all do. Many people who lack homes of their own are invisible, living in vehicles, staying overnight in workplaces, riding the night bus, couch-surfing, and looking like everyone else. The most devastated and marginalized are the most visible. Even they try to keep a low profile: I walk past the unhoused daily, seeing how they seek to disappear, situating themselves behind big-box stores and alongside industrial sites, where they are less likely to inspire the housed to call for their removal.

The young can't remember (and many of their elders hardly recall) how few people were homeless before the 1980s. They don't grasp that this prob-

lem doesn't have to exist, that we could largely end it, as we could many other social problems, with little more radical a solution than a return to the buffered capitalism of forty years ago, when real wages were higher, responsibility for taxes more equitably distributed, and a far stronger safety net caught more of those who fell. Homelessness has been created by federal, state, and local policies—not just by defunding mental-health programs, which is too often cited as the cause. Perfectly sane people lose access to housing every day, though the resultant ordeal may undermine some of that sanity, as it might yours and mine.

In our antitax era, many cities fish for revenue by taxing homelessness, turning the police into de facto bill collectors. Those unable to pay the fines and warrants for panhandling, loitering, or sleeping outdoors—meaning most people forced to panhandle, loiter, or sleep outdoors in the first place—can be hauled into court at any time. As Astra Taylor put it recently, “Municipal budgets are overly reliant on petty infraction penalties because affluent, mostly white citizens have been engaged in a ‘tax revolt’ for decades, lobbying for lower rates and special treatment.” Black Lives Matter has in part been a revolt against this criminalization of poverty and in particular the police persecution of African Americans for minor infractions.

Two homeless people have already been killed by the police in San Francisco this year. On April 7, in front of the encampment where he had lived for several months, officers shot Luis Gongora within thirty seconds of getting out of their cars. They said Gongora, a forty-five-year-old indigenous man from the Yucatán, was menacing them; several witnesses said he was cowering on the ground. The police chief made a big show of a photographic blowup of Gongora's thirteen-inch kitchen knife, and suggested that owning such an item was sinister. (Many unhoused people own knives for protection.) I went home from the police meeting and measured my largest kitchen knife: thirteen inches, the same length. Owning a kitchen knife without owning a kitchen can be considered criminal.

Six weeks later, on May 19, a single bullet killed Jessica Williams, a pregnant, African-American mother of five who was unarmed and posed no threat to anyone at the time of her execution. She was in a stolen car, though who stole it was never made clear, and she was trying to flee the police out of what proved to be justified fear.

The situation is particularly bitter in San Francisco, now annexed as part of Silicon Valley, since the tech industry created a gigantic bubble of wealth that puts economic inequality in much sharper relief. Here is Mark Zuckerberg, the sixth-richest person in the world, in his house on the western edge of the historically Latino and working-class Mission District. Here is Division Street, on the northern edge of that neighborhood, where more

than 250 housing-deprived people settled in tents early in 2016, seeking shelter from both the rain and the mayor's sweeps of the homeless as he primed the city for Super Bowl visitors.

The tech boom has also brought an influx of highly paid employees to the city. They have precipitated a housing crisis, marked by skyrocketing rents, evictions, displacement, and the transformation of single-room-occupancy hotels—traditionally the last refuge of the indigent—into tech dorms. (Thousands of other former long-term residences—houses and apartments—have been converted into short-term rentals for Airbnb, a corporation founded in San Francisco whose impact has been bitterly denounced from Venice to New Orleans to Vancouver.) One of the common narratives about the homeless is that they came here to reap the social services of San Francisco: that they are intruders, outsiders, freeloaders, and that we can therefore justify their expulsion. But a recent survey of people living on San Francisco's streets concluded that 71 percent had already been in the city before becoming homeless, and most of the rest were from the region or the state.

Silicon Valley also leads the way in creating technologies that eliminate a plethora of jobs—toll-takers, sales clerks, inventory and warehouse workers, and (if Google, Tesla, and Uber have their way) taxi drivers and truckers—that might once have been filled by our current homeless population.

Of course, being homeless is itself hard work—over the thirty-six years that I've observed the indigent in San Francisco, they have often made me think of hunter-gatherers. These people forage for survival, eluding attack, roaming, watching, maybe making the rounds of social services and soup kitchens, trying to protect what possessions they have, starting over from nothing when medications, phones, and identities are stolen by compatriots or seized by police. The city is a wilderness to them; that they now live in tents designed for recreational camping is all the more ironic. Gumpert notes that some feel they cannot leave their tents for even short lengths of time, for fear of losing their belongings. Others suffer from sleep deprivation, since they can find no safe place to rest.

Those without houses are too often considered to be problems to people rather than people with problems. No wonder the means for addressing them is often that used to address litter, dirt, and contamination: removal. “If you're trying to prevent the undesirables from using park bathrooms, adding porta potties seems like a pretty decent solution,” said a Mission resident named Brandon on an online neighborhood forum. “If you're trying to keep the dirty undesirables away forever, you'll need constant police presence with a mandate to use violence to enforce whatever law prohibits their existence.” ■

Robert Gumpert is based in San Francisco. Rebecca Solnit is a contributing editor of Harper's Magazine.

Previous spread: A tent encampment along Division Street, in San Francisco, February 16, 2016. Forced by the city government to leave more visible areas during the week of the Super Bowl in early February, many homeless people moved to Division Street, near the offices of several tech companies, including Adobe, Airbnb, Uber, and Zynga, as well as luxury-car dealerships and condominium developments. After numerous complaints by local businesses and residents, the city began monthly sweeps, forcing them to move progressively east, into less developed areas of the city. All photographs © Robert Gumpert

Opposite page: Marshall prepares for another move, to a site near the former headquarters of Dolby, a few blocks away from Division Street, February 12. Within days he lost his tent and moved again



Top: Kathy, a fifty-one-year-old trans woman, outside her tent on Division Street, February 14. Bottom: Corey, forty-six, in his makeshift shelter, wedged between a parking-lot fence and the concrete support for Highway 101, beneath Division Street, February 16. Corey moved here after losing the box he was previously living in, half a block away from the Airbnb headquarters



Top: Police officers help Baby Face get rid of some of his belongings, a process the female officer called "downsizing," after ordering him to leave their patrol area in the Design Center, a few blocks east of Division Street, March 1. Bottom: Baby Face pulls his belongings along Division Street after being forced to move again, March 9







Previous spread: Brent, forty-two, July 4. He says he has been homeless for ten years. He lives in an encampment of about thirty people along Islais Creek, off 3rd Street on the far eastern edge of San Francisco. Top: A homeless man shaves outside his tent, Division Street, February 22. Bottom: An encampment at the eastern edge of Division Street, February 14



Top: The Design Center district, February 29. Bottom: Kelly, thirty-four, on Brannan Street, less than a block from Airbnb, February 16, 2015. Following spread: An encampment in the shadow of a construction site in the Mission Bay neighborhood, on the eastern edge of San Francisco, June 12, 2016. Long undeveloped and a destination for homeless people pushed out of the rest of the city, the area is now home to a UCSF medical campus, biotechnology companies, and housing complexes





WISBROW-BEGLINS CORPORATION
ELECTRICAL CONTRACTORS & SIGNERS

NO
PARKING
ANYTIME

REPORT
EMERGENCY
1-877-723-7245
CROSSING
754749Y
16TH STREET