

L.A. criticized as “meanest city” in America

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Los Angeles is famous as the nation's capital of movie stars and rich and envied people. But its lesser-known distinction as the nation's homeless capital has earned it a new title: the "Meanest City" in America.

In a report released Tuesday, the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty and the National Coalition for the Homeless named Los Angeles the No. 1 "Meanest City" out of 273 nationwide.

The report says a primary reason for the dubious honor was a new Los Angeles police crackdown called the Safer Cities Initiative that it claims has trapped tens of thousands of poor, homeless and disabled residents in the criminal justice system.

In January 2006 - before the Safer Cities Initiative began - a similar report released by the same group ranked Los Angeles as the 18th "Meanest City."

Advocates for the homeless said the city vaulting up the negative rankings reflects government decisions that are harmful to the homeless.

"This isn't to say that homelessness and criminalization isn't a problem everywhere, but to be pointed out as the worst among more than 270 cities is a strong indictment of policies that continue to put police over housing as the main response to homelessness," said Becky Dennison, co-director of the Los Angeles Community Action Network, a community organization and advocacy group that works with homeless and low-income people.

But a spokesman for Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa blasted the report, calling it "short-sighted and misleading."

"It fails to detail the city's housing-first strategy, which reflects national-best practices for housing and services that help homeless individuals stay off the streets," said Villaraigosa spokesman Casey Hernandez in a written statement. "And the assertion that Los Angeles criminalizes homelessness is simply false."

He said the mayor has committed more than \$100 million since 2007 to housing the homeless, and funded more than 1,078 housing units for the homeless, more than in the past 12 years combined.

The Safer City Initiative, he said, has helped reduce crime by more than 35 percent, particularly in areas with high populations of homeless.

"The city's first priority is to protect our most vulnerable residents from violent crime," Hernandez said. "The city dedicated an additional 50 officers to Skid Row to protect its residents and remove a significant criminal element that historically hinders efforts to provide services to the homeless."

Anat Rubin, director of public policy at Lamp Community, a Los Angeles-based organization that provides housing for homeless people with severe mental illnesses, said the report confirms what many people working on Skid Row have been saying since the initiative began.

"We've been saying that the purpose of this policing is to target the poor and homeless and not necessarily crime in this community," Rubin said. "The policing has criminalized both poverty and homelessness and targeted behaviors that are often symptoms of homelessness and mental disabilities."

Los Angeles Police Department and Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority officials did not return calls for comment.

The Safer Cities Initiative crackdown that pushed the city to the top of the list brought extra LAPD officers to the 50-square block area of Skid Row, according to the report. In the first two years of the initiative, the officers made more than 750 arrests each month in a community that is home to about 13,000 people.

The report was entitled "Homes Not Handcuffs: The Criminalization of Homelessness in U.S. Cities."

The other top 10 "Meanest Cities" behind Los Angeles were, in order: St. Petersburg, Fla.; Orlando, Fla.; Atlanta; Gainesville, Fla.; Kalamazoo, Mich.; San Francisco; Honolulu; Bradenton, Fla.; and Berkeley.

The authors cited a 2007 UCLA study that found the city was spending \$6 million annually to pay for 50 police officers to crack down on crime on Skid Row at a time when the city budgeted only \$5.7 million for homeless services. Advocates said the money could have been used to provide housing and other services to 225 people.

The report also cites the racial disparities in Skid Row enforcement and escalating police brutality resulting from the initiative. In one incident, the authors cited the example of two police officers who attacked a petite homeless woman, who may have been mentally disabled, with clubs and pepper spray.

If the city wants to improve its ranking, Dennison said it needs to invest in programs to house the homeless.

"We need to invest in housing and stop criminalizing people," Dennison said.