



“Big Lebowski Syndrome” – Why Haven’t Californians Demanded Change?

Description

Over the last few weeks, a number of journalists and commentators have pushed back against my criticisms of Governor Gavin Newsom. Crime and homelessness have been increasing everywhere, they say, not just in California. Covid interrupted Newsom’s ambitious plans to address homelessness, they note. And California’s high cost of living long predated Newsom’s election in 2018.

With all due respect to the people rushing to the governor’s defense, those claims are ridiculous. We Californians pay more for taxes than anyone else in America. We have a nearly \$100 billion surplus. And yet we have the worst public services.

Just take crime and homelessness. You can’t walk safely through many neighborhoods in our largest cities. Street addicts feel entitled to sleep, smoke meth, and terrorize passengers on mass transit and public parks. And despite spending more on homelessness and mental health, *per capita*, than any other state, homelessness increased 31% in California and declined 18% in the rest of the U.S., over the last ten years.

The guy walked away bloody. Cops have been called. Will they show up? Happy [#HerbaLife24Tri](#) everyone! [#venice](#) [#homeless](#) [#encampment](#) [#centennialpark](#) pic.twitter.com/osHCiQTRCZ

— The Venice Wasteland (@VeniceWasteland) [May 15, 2022](#)

It’s not like Newsom was an outsider to politics before becoming governor. In truth, it’s been [the statewide implementation of the homeless policies](#) he pioneered in San Francisco 20 years ago that — by attracting addicts from across the U.S. with the offer of free housing, low-cost drugs, and the freedom to camp anywhere — worsened the problem.

It’s true covid occupied a significant amount of Newsom’s time in 2020 and 2021, and that crime is rising nationwide. Newsom gave an excellent “State of the State” speech in January 2020, laying out a new agenda on homelessness.

But rather than pursuing a new strategy on homelessness, Newsom doubled down on the same failed policies, and Newsom has done nothing of significance to increase policing, psychiatry, and probation, the “Three Key Ps” needed to prevent crime. Instead, he oversaw a reduction in the prison population from 127,000, when he took office, to 96,000, today, and intends to close two more prisons and [release, wily-oily, another 76,000 prisoners](#).

Newsom frequently boasts that California is a “nation-state” and that we are “leading the world.” In truth, Newsom is leading other progressive cities to make things worse not better, not just on crime and homelessness but also cost of living and quality of life issues, too.

The massive taxpayer subsidies that resulted in California’s electricity prices rising seven times more than they did in the rest of the U.S.? Newsom is proposing more of them. The big, unconditional spending increases for public schools that coincided with a *decline* in student performance? Newsom wants more of them. The housing shortage he promised to solve? He’s only made it worse, and is proposing nothing new to address it.

After I criticized Newsom of either playing a double game, or being incompetent, in claiming to support the building of a desalination plant, even as the Coastal Commission killed it, several people pointed out that Newsom only appoints four of the 12 commissioners.

California’s in extreme drought & yet [@GavinNewsom](#) won’t act. People ignored his plea to reduce water use, which has spiked. Now, his appointees have rejected a desalination plant he claims to support, which means he’s lying or incompetent or both <https://t.co/2dCnbjlu5K>

— Michael Shellenberger (@ShellenbergerMD) [May 13, 2022](#)

But Newsom holds extraordinary powers over the eight Coastal Commissioners he does not appoint for the simple reason that they are appointed by the Senate Rules Committee, which is controlled by Democrats, and the Speaker of the Assembly, a close ally to Newsom. And the Coastal Commission voted *unanimously* to reject the proposed desalination plant, meaning, *all four of Newsom’s own commissioners voted against it*.

The bottom line is that [Newsom is the puppet of groups](#) who oppose desalination not because of the environmental impacts — the Israelis have proven that there are very few — but rather because they want scarce water and energy because they view scarcity as a way to prevent more people from coming to California.

Most of us believe that if we work hard and play by the rules, we should own our own home, send our children to good schools, and be able to retire in our sixties. And most of us believe that, if we are going to pay super-high taxes, we should be able to walk or ride safely through our cities without fear of being assaulted.

Why, then, haven’t Californians demanded change?

Big Lebowski Syndrome (BLS)



“The Dude abides” — and that’s part of the problem

Perhaps the main reason Californians have not changed our leaders is because nobody, until now, has offered an alternative to the status quo that is also aligned with our values. Many Californians last year supported the recall of Newsom as a way to shake up the system. But Republicans got behind Larry Elder, a charismatic radio show host who was [viciously and wrongly smeared](#), but nonetheless could not articulate a humane and realistic plan to deal with the homeless crisis.

Another reason Californians have not demanded change is because many of us are able to escape the chaos in the cities. I am one of those Californians. I live in the Berkeley Hills and, like everyone who lives on a hill, I can go about my days without ever coming across somebody screaming, psychotically, at invisible enemies, overdosing on drugs, or defecating on the sidewalk.

Over the last two years, when I would tell my neighbors I was writing a book on the homeless crisis, several wrinkled their faces and whispered, *“That’s why I don’t go downtown.”* On Twitter, many people who claim to be progressive believe they have successfully debunked our documentation of human depravity in downtown San Francisco by posting selfies of themselves in front of Golden Gate Bridge, or atop Lombard Street, where there aren’t homeless encampments.

But one of the biggest and least discussed reasons that Californians don’t demand change is what one might call “Big Lebowski Syndrome,” or BLS, for short. In the Coen Brother’s 1998 cult classic, the main character, Jeffrey Lebowski (played by Jeff Bridges), calls himself “the Dude” (*“or, uh, His Dudeness, or uh, Duder, or El Duderino if you’re not into the whole brevity thing”*). The Dude captures the liberal slacker energy of many Californians when it comes to homelessness. His signature catchphrase is, *“The Dude abides.”*

When I would raise the issue of, say, people camping on sidewalks with my progressive friends in Berkeley, many would say the equivalent of, *“Just take it easy, man,”* another of the Dude’s aphorisms. When I raised a concern about a guy sleeping under a tarp on the sidewalk next to a children’s playground, a guy I play soccer with said, “Take it easy, Mike! He’s probably mentally ill!” When I pointed out that it was neither compassionate nor safe to let mentally ill people, or addicts, or both, to sleep on sidewalks, many progressives would just shake their heads. *Take it easy, man.*

For a period while working on *San Fransicko* I despaired that there was nothing I could say that would cut through BLS. It finally dawned on me that I needed to explain to people the solution *before* complaining about the problem. This may seem counter-intuitive, and in some ways is. But the reality is that Californians already know there's a homeless problem. They're stuck on the solution. They don't want to put mentally ill addicts in jail or prison — and rightly so. But they don't know the alternative. And so we developed one: Cal-Psych.

I tested it out on my progressive family and friends and it really worked. By the time my friend Leighton Woodhouse and I gathered signatures in Berkeley and Oakland in March, in order to qualify for the ballot, we had boiled down our agenda to a single sentence. The exchanges went like this:

Me: [cheery] Hi! Are you a registered voter?

Progressive-looking person: [suspiciously] I am.

Me: Great! I'm running for governor and wanted to see if you would sign the petition so I can get on the ballot.

Progressive: [curious but still suspicious] Why are you running?

Me: [gubernatorially] I'm running to create a state-wide psychiatric and addiction care system to deal with the homeless crisis.

Seven times out of ten that was enough for people to want to sign the petition. One out of ten would decline. And another two out of ten would ask a few more questions, usually something like this.

Progressive: [hopeful but still a bit suspicious] That sounds good, but how do you prevent it from being bad?

Me: You mean bad like "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest"?

Progressive: [sounding relieved] Yeah! Like that!

Me: Most people don't need hospitals and just need rehab for 90 to 180 days. My aunt had schizophrenia and had good care in a group home. And even the hospitals are much better than they were in the 1950s.

Having spent the last year explaining Cal-Psych in dozens of articles, podcasts, and TV appearances, hundreds of thousands if not millions of Californians and other Americans — including my progressive friends in Berkeley — have come to understand the basic argument behind the concept. San Francisco and Los Angeles are simply unable to treat the country's addicts and mentally ill, alone. Lower-cost group homes can be found across the state, outside of the open drug scenes. And services can be more efficiently allocated through a single psychiatric and addiction care system than through the current 58 county model.

Cal-Psych, in other words, is just the kind of agenda that even the Dude would abide.

“This Aggression Will Not Stand, Man”



Gina McDonald and Jacqui Berlinn are demanding that Gov. Gavin Newsom shut down California's open drug scenes

I've proselytized Cal-Psych enough that some on the Right now express concern that I'm going to be too soft on hardened criminals. I've thus integrated into my discussion of these issues that there are obviously some hard-core sociopathic violent criminals who need to be in prison and not just released, as [Newsom is dead set upon doing](#).

But the large majority of the people on the street need psychiatric care or drug rehab. The problem is that many California cities, including previously conservative ones like San Diego, have stopped enforcing laws against public camping, public drug use, and public defecation, and so we can't easily separate out the really bad guys from people who are just addicts or mentally ill without enforcing basic laws.

In my [recent interview](#) with *Quillette*, I explained that Californians needed to grow up. We not only need to take responsibility, and shut down the open drug scenes, we also need to trust that we can discern between hard core criminals who need prison and ordinary addicts who just need rehab. That's not just about getting more compassionate. It's also about getting angry.

For our super-high taxes we not only deserve basic public safety, we also deserve nice things, like beautiful, livable, and walkable cities. Or, as the Dude would say, *“This will not stand, ya know. This aggression will not stand, man.”*

The Californians who are most challenging the BLS are Jacqui Berlinn and Gina McDonald of [Mothers Against Drug Deaths](#). They generated [international publicity](#) last month after putting up a billboard in Union Square in San Francisco and warning foreign tourists, particularly families, not to visit the city,

given readily-available and deadly fentanyl that city officials allow to be sold and used freely. San Francisco's mayor rebuffed the mothers and today the open drug scene, dominated by violent and heavily armed drug dealers, has spread to cover much of downtown.



Undeterred, Berlinn and McDonald last week [launched a new advertising campaign](#), this one in Sacramento and aimed at Newsom. "Welcome to Camp Fentanyl," the headline reads, using the state's iconic parks typeface and billboard style. "Open to kids everywhere." The ad contains a demand: "Gavin Newsom: Shut Down Open Air Drug Markets Now."

The campaign generated an immediate impact. "I'm a parent," said Newsom on Friday. "All of you are concerned about what's happened with opioid overdose deaths, concerned about what's happening with fentanyl in particular." Newsom's policy response was grossly inadequate: just \$8 million (with an "m") for the Attorney General to form a task force. If Newsom's past task forces are any guide, this one will make the problem worse. But at least he acknowledged, for the first time, the problem.

I'm supporting Shellenberger, an independent, for California governor. He would easily be the most substantive, solutions-oriented governor we've ever had. <https://t.co/yzlcmRtQiF>

— David Sacks (@DavidSacks) [May 14, 2022](#)

None of it's enough and it's time for a change. As I noted yesterday, a growing number of Republicans are acknowledging that a Republican can't be elected governor, but I can be. Since writing that column I picked up the endorsement of two influential center-Right Californians: David Sacks, a co-founder of PayPal and famous venture capitalist, and Scott Adams, the creator of the "Dilbert" cartoon and influential commentator. Sacks said I "would easily be the most substantive, solutions-oriented governor we've ever had" and Adams said I am an "Easy choice if you want solutions."

I'm all in on [@ShellenbergerMD](https://t.co/kZUDHIHa6O) too. Easy choice if you want solutions.
<https://t.co/kZUDHIHa6O>

— Scott Adams (@ScottAdamsSays) [May 15, 2022](#)

Now it's up to the electorate to change. We must start seeing things like public safety, good schools, and well-managed forests not as merely nice things but necessary ones. And most of all we must push back against the BLS and get a little angry. *We won't take it easy, man.* Not until we start getting the public services we've more than paid for with our super-high taxes.

Authored by Michael Shellenberger via Substack,

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Date Created

05/20/2022