

Uber's robot cars move in, and the homeless must move along

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Scoop: Security guards working at Uber's San Francisco facility for self-driving cars dismantle a nearby tent city, according to homeless people who were displaced.

Jason Pitter had been living in a tent city behind the San Francisco warehouse at which Uber houses its self-driving cars. The encampment was dismantled a month ago.

Jason Pitter has been homeless for months.

Until last week he had a tent, several blankets, as well as some other personal belongings. But after being pushed out of a tent city in a San Francisco industrial neighborhood, Pitter has moved repeatedly, getting into scrapes and losing almost all of his possessions.

In November, private security guards who work at a facility run by the ride-hailing company Uber moved Pitter and the rest of a tent city to other parts of San Francisco. What does Uber, valued by venture capitalists at \$68 billion, have nearby? A garage for its self-driving cars.

"I'm starting all over," Pitter said quietly. He says his red-and-black blanket, laid out neatly next to him, is all he has left. Even his tent is gone.

As Uber readied the controversial launch of its self-driving cars in San Francisco, security guards dismantled nearly a dozen tents that housed roughly 30 homeless people behind the company's warehouse, according to people who lived in the encampment and residents of the surrounding neighborhood. Several U-Haul trucks appeared, they say, and everyone was moved out.

Uber's self-driving car program hit a roadblock Wednesday when California Department of Motor Vehicles revoked the registrations for 16 of the company's autonomous vehicles. The company had been testing the cars on San Francisco streets despite the DMV warning it hadn't gotten the appropriate permission.

Uber didn't respond to multiple requests for comment about the tent city. Neither did Regional Protection Agency, the company that provides the security guards at the Uber facility.

The dismantling of the tent city, known as "Lower Perry," is a stark illustration of the growing divide caused by San Francisco's tech boom. While the city is flush with tech workers and Silicon Valley money, the homeless population continues to grow. Pitter and the rest of Lower Perry's residents are now part of San Francisco's invisible displacement.

Advocates for the homeless say the move appears to have been conducted in accordance with the law. And by all accounts, the security guards treated the homeless people with courtesy. Two of the people moved out of the encampment say the guards demonstrated care as they moved belongings.

The displacement of homeless people is an all-too-common problem, advocates say. Big companies in San Francisco move homeless people if they're perceived to be interfering with business. Camps have been dismantled across the city for years, including a massive 250-person tent city that was cleared out by local officials in February.

Meanwhile, there are few places for the homeless to go.

The average rent for a studio apartment in San Francisco is \$2,200, according to the nonprofit Coalition on Homelessness. Meanwhile, 8,000 households are now on waiting lists for

public housing and the homeless population has ballooned to nearly 7,000 people. And shelters aren't always an option. About 1,300 beds are available, meaning only one in five people get one.

"They want people to move along," said Kelley Cutler, human rights organizer for Coalition on Homelessness. "The problem is there is nowhere for people to move along to."

Dismantling Lower Perry

Lower Perry was a rare location for a tent city. It's under a highway, so there's shelter from the rain. It's behind a warehouse, so out of the way of foot traffic. And it's far enough from downtown that people could camp there without being hassled by the police or the city's Department of Public Works.

"It was there for years," said Adam Sullivan, who's worked at nearby Goat Hill Pizza since 2009. "There'd be tents and a bunch of homeless people just all along the wall, one after the other."

Now, instead of tents, you'll see rows of white plastic saw horses crowding the sidewalk and green signs reading "No Trespassing" affixed to the warehouse walls. A handful of Regional Protection Agency security guards, who work at Uber's self-driving car warehouse, patrol the street.

In the run-up to Uber's launch of its self-driving cars in San Francisco, it parked its vehicles along the same sidewalk a homeless encampment recently stood.

Sam Dodge, the deputy director of San Francisco's Department of Homelessness and Supportive Services, said groups of homeless people had moved in and out of the area, setting up camp, for years. His department had done some outreach there in the past.

To Dodge's knowledge, his department wasn't contacted by Uber about Lower Perry. The San Francisco Police Department and the Department of Public Works also said they have no record of being contacted by the company regarding the Lower Perry camp.

A representative for the city's non-emergency call number 311 said his office received a call about the encampment from Regional Protection Agency in mid-October. Businesses that want to move homeless camps will often call 311, as well as the police and DPW.

A man who works at a nearby business, and asked not to be identified, said he watched the dismantling of Lower Perry. He saw U-Haul trucks out back and private security guards who had been stationed at Uber's facility loading up trucks with the homeless people's stuff. Once they'd finished, he spoke with one of the guards.

"I asked the guy, 'So you got rid of the encampment?'" said the man. "He said, 'Yeah, we got rid of it all.'"

Pitter's account of moving out of Lower Perry is similar. He said he was given about a week's notification that the encampment would be taken down. On the day of the move, Pitter said the private security guards came with U-Hauls, helped people load up their stuff and then drove them to wherever each individual wanted to go. They even bought pizza for everyone, he said.

"That was the best way I've ever been put out," Pitter said, adding the man in charge was polite. "He was very well mannered and respectful."

Another homeless man named Gary Evans, who stayed at Lower Perry for about a week and said he was there when it got dismantled, agreed the people who moved them out "were very helpful."

'Sidewalk Shuffle'

Camping in public areas is illegal in San Francisco. People aren't allowed to obstruct sidewalks or parking spaces. Typically, if homeless people aren't causing complaints, the police will look the other way. But if calls come in, San Francisco can take down tent cities.

Authorities are often involved in moving encampments when businesses make complaints. But it's also legal for businesses to take matters into their own hands by moving an encampment on their own or using private security.

The problem with businesses moving camps on their own is that homeless people are just displaced, rather than being referred to support services, said Cutler from the Coalition on Homelessness.

"We call it the 'sidewalk shuffle,' where people are pushed half a block away, a block away," Cutler said. "It'd be nice if they put the efforts and the energy that goes into that to actually helping people."

When Pitter was pushed out of Lower Perry, where he'd lived for nine months, he opted to move just a block up to a spot known as "Upper Perry." Shortly after that he moved a street over, and then back to Upper Perry, where he was beaten, robbed and left with just his blanket.

He's now in a spot known as the "Horseshoe," a cement semi-circle located in a large median below two highways. It offers a view of San Francisco's skyline, dotted with a half a dozen cranes working on new construction. It's a world wholly different from the one Pitter inhabits.

The constant moving has been rough, he says.

"I've started feeling like I'm not a human being any more."