

JERRY BROWN'S SOLYNDRA CORRUPTION IS FORCING MOST CALIFORNIANS TO CONSIDER LEAVING



Las Vegas is one of the most popular destinations for those who leave California. It's close, it's a job center, and the cost of living is much cheaper. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)



Steve Lopez Contact
Reporter

The rent steals so much of your paycheck, you might have to move back in with your parents, and half your life is spent staring at the rear end of the car in front of you.

You'd like to think it will get better, but when? All around you, young and old alike are saying goodbye to California.

"Best thing I could have done," said retiree Michael J. Van Essen, who was paying \$1,160 for a one-bedroom apartment in Silver Lake until a year and a half ago. Then he bought a house with a creek behind it for \$165,000 in Mason City, Iowa, and now pays \$500 a month less on his mortgage than he did on his rent in Los Angeles.

Van Essen was one of the many readers who responded in October when I reached out to people who got sick and tired

of the high cost of living in California. I heard from someone in Idaho and others who moved to Arizona and Nevada.

Solid recent data is hard to come by, but 2016 census figures showed an uptick in the number of people who fled Los Angeles and Orange counties for less expensive California locales, or they left the state altogether.

“If housing costs continue to rise, we should expect to see more people leaving high-cost areas,” said Jed Kolko, an economist with UC Berkeley’s Turner Center for Housing Innovation.

Las Vegas is one of the most popular destinations for those who leave California. It’s close, it’s a job center, and the cost of living is much cheaper, with plenty of brand-new houses going for between \$200,000 and \$300,000.

So I went to Sin City to see whether, when you add up all the pluses and minuses, there is life after California.

Cyndy Hernandez, a 30-year-old USC grad who grew up in Fontana, says the answer is yes, absolutely.

“It’s easier to live here and have a comfortable lifestyle,” said Hernandez, a community organizer with NARAL Pro-Choice Nevada.



Cyndy Hernandez, a 30-year-old USC grad who grew up in Fontana, moved to Las Vegas because of the cheaper housing costs.

I visited Hernandez in the two-bedroom mountain-view “apartment home” she shares with a roommate. Each pays \$650 a month in a gated development with free Wi-Fi, a swimming pool and cabana-shaded deck, fitness center, media room and complimentary beverages. It’s like living at a resort.

Like other transplants I spoke to in Nevada, Hernandez didn’t want to leave California. It’s home. It’s where she went to school and where her parents still live in the house she grew up in. But unless you choose a career that will pay you a small fortune to manage costs driven higher by a stubborn shortage of new housing, California is not a dream, it’s a mirage.

Moving to get a better job or move up the workplace chain is nothing new. But

what's going on here
seems different —
people leaving not for
better jobs or pay, but
because housing
elsewhere is so much
cheaper they can live
the middle-class life that
eludes them in
California.

After college,
Hernandez worked as a
congressional staffer in
Washington, D.C., and
then went to Chicago for
a few years. But the
West drew her back. Not
California, but Nevada,
where she worked on
Hillary Clinton's
presidential campaign in
Las Vegas and then
joined the staff of a state
legislator in the state
capital.

"I started looking at the
bigger picture in Carson
City, where I was able to
pay the rent, have a car
and a comfortable life
and put some money

into a 401(k),”
Hernandez said.
“Would I be able to do
that in California?
Probably not.”

She moved to Las
Vegas in June, enjoyed
exploring the city
beyond the Strip and
made new friends, and
her financial stress
melted away in the
desert sun. Now she’s
saving up for a house,
which she doesn’t
think she would ever
have been able to do
in California.

Hernandez connected
me with Arlene
Angulo, 23, who grew
up in Riverside,
worked as a cast
member at Disneyland,
loved the L.A. culture
and got her teaching
credential at UC
Riverside. She had her
pick of two teaching
jobs — one in the Los
Angeles area and one

in Las Vegas.

“L.A. would have been my first choice, and I didn’t want to have to leave California,” said Angulo, an English teacher who understands basic math. She knew that on a starting teacher’s salary, “I couldn’t afford to stay there.”

In Summerlin, a Las Vegas suburb, Angulo and a roommate each pays \$600 for a big three-bedroom apartment. Angulo is in graduate school at the University of Nevada Las Vegas while teaching by day, and said she’s going to start saving up to buy a house in the area.

Jonas Peterson

enjoyed the California lifestyle and trips to the beach while living in Valencia with his wife, a nurse, and their two young kids. But in 2013, he answered a call to head the Las Vegas Global Economic Alliance, and the family moved to Henderson, Nev.



Jonas Peterson, in front of a billboard promoting Las Vegas, moved to Henderson, Nev., with his family from Valencia.
(Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

“We doubled the size of our house and lowered our mortgage payment,” said Peterson, whose wife is focusing on the kids now instead of her career.

Part of Peterson’s job is to lure companies to Nevada, a state that runs on gaming money rather than tax dollars.

“There’s no corporate income tax, no personal income tax...and the regulatory environment is much easier to work with,” said Peterson.

Some companies

have made the
move from
California, and
others have set
up satellites in
Nevada.

California, a
world economic
power, will
survive the
raids, and it will
continue to
draw people
from other
states and
around the
world. Its assets
include cutting-
edge tech and
entertainment
industries,
major ports,
great weather
and dozens of
first-rate
universities.

But the Golden
State is
tarnished and
ever-more
divided by a
crisis with no

end in sight,
and this year's
legislative
efforts to
spawn more
housing for
working
people lacked
urgency and
scale. Slowly,
steadily, and
somewhat
indifferently,
we are
burdening,
breaking and
even
exporting our
middle class.

Breanna
Rawding, 26,
felt the
squeeze. She
grew up in
Simi Valley
and until
recently
worked in
Anaheim as a
marketing
coordinator,
but lived in

Burbank
because
family
friends let
her stay in a
tiny
backyard
cottage for
just \$400 a
month.



Breanna Rawding, 26, manager of marketing communications of Las Vegas Global Economic Alliance, spends time with her dog Bodie in her apartment in Las Vegas. She moved from Burbank to escape a long commute. (Genaro Molina / Los Angeles Times)

Her
commute, by

car and
train, took
between
90 minutes
and two
hours each
way. She
wanted to
move to
the
Platinum
Triangle
area, near
her job,
but
scratched
the idea
when she
saw that
studio
apartments
were going
for as
much as
\$1,700.

Rawding
endured
the
commute,
as well as
a long-
distance

relationship
with a
boyfriend
who was
raised in
Torrance
and went
to UCLA,
but lived
in Las
Vegas.
There, he
could
afford a
nice
apartment
on his
teacher's
salary,
and he
recently
signed
papers to
buy a
house in
a new
development.

"I didn't
want to
leave
California.
I love the

weather,
I love
the
outdoors,
I love
my
family
and
friends,”
said
Rawding,
a
Chapman
University
grad.

But in
California
she saw
a future
in
which
she'd
be
trapped,
indefinitely,
by high
rents,
ridiculous
commutes,
or some
combination
of the

two.

“I saw
articles
about
millennials
leaving
California
because
they
were
never
going
to be
able
to
have
houses
they
could
afford,”
she
said.

In
June,
everything
changed
for
Rawding.

She
got a

marketing
communications
job
with
the
Global
Economic
Alliance
in
Vegas
and
rented
a
lovely
\$900-
a-month
apartment
that's
so
close
to
work,
she
goes
home
at
lunch
to
let
her
dog
Bodie

out.
And
it's
near
her
boyfriend's
place.

Nevada's
gain,
our
loss.

California,
the
place
where
anything
was
possible,
has
become
the
place
where
nothing
is
affordable.