

# PREVENTING & REDUCING HOMELESSNESS

## **THE PROBLEM**

On a given night, more than 500,000 people lack shelter in the US as a conservative estimate, with growing income inequalities exacerbating this crisis.<sup>1</sup> Issues surrounding homelessness encompass many of society's most pervasive social concerns: substance abuse, serious mental illness, hunger, displaced families, post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic health problems. The reasons people fall into homelessness are as varied and unique as the people themselves, including: deep poverty, job loss, underemployment, a lack of personal support systems, lack of affordable housing and more. An even greater number of Americans are housing insecure and at risk of falling behind on payments; these individuals will often forgo medication and food to keep up on rent, mortgage payments or property taxes.

Experiencing homelessness has long-term consequences. People's health will suffer (stress, preventative care, disease management), they may go into debt, default on payments and loans, and see their credit history destroyed. People also lose their savings by putting down expensive security deposits, as landlords may demand up to three months rent. In unequal housing markets, as exist in so many American cities, housing insecurity is a common reality and a frequent cause of evictions, which contribute to an inability to secure housing in the future. Additionally, there are significant barriers to securing housing, the most critical of which include having a criminal record, having poor credit, or simply not having the money for a down payment. Cities often criminalize homelessness, thereby contributing to the ongoing cycle of the chronically homeless. Examples of criminalization include raids and enforcement of tent cities, sleeping on benches, and public urination. These behavior citations often result in fines and fees, and potentially arrest, all of which go on a criminal record and undermine an individual's ability to thrive and secure housing. Many of these realities are directly tied to landlord priorities and policies, which make the cycle of homelessness even more difficult to break.

Finally, racial inequality is a driving factor in the housing and homelessness crisis.<sup>2</sup> Black people and people of color are far more likely to face homelessness and housing insecurity due to a long history of residential segregation, loan discrimination, predatory lending, and the impacts of economic inequality and poverty. If we are to craft meaningful solutions, we need to view the crisis through an equity lens.

## **POLICY ISSUES**

The human services community categorizes homelessness as *transitional* or *chronic*. Using the annual Homeless Point in Time Counts, cities are better able to craft solutions that work for disparate populations; accurately assessing a homeless population is key to effective response.<sup>3</sup> Those who are frequently disabled or struggle with mental health issues or addiction have far less capacity to maintain secure housing and are often chronically homeless. Transitional homelessness occurs for brief periods of time (less than a month) and often is situational: a lost job, or as the result of evictions, for example.

## **SOLUTIONS**

The Housing First approach argues that stable housing is a foundation for other changes and an ability to thrive.<sup>4</sup> Workforce training, jobs, and consistent healthcare access are contingent on having a safe and quality place to sleep and reside. Municipalities can fund permanently supportive housing to support those who are chronically homeless. Research shows that the cost of housing someone is far less than providing homeless services.<sup>5</sup> One unfortunate caveat is that some states have separate funding formulas at the state and local level so accurate estimates can be difficult to make. A chronically homeless person costs the taxpayer nearly \$35,000 per year through hospitalizations and use of emergency services and jails; that amount is halved when they are placed in supportive housing.<sup>6</sup> Transitional housing is also critically important for those who are

temporarily homeless and should recognize those who may be living in their vehicles through Safe Parking Programs and Vehicle Residency Permits.<sup>7</sup>

To reduce the likelihood of someone becoming homeless, cities should consider a series of actions including: increasing eviction protection measures, embracing “just cause” eviction and a right to counsel; implementing rent control to preserve affordable housing; enacting inclusionary zoning policies to both preserve and create quality affordable housing; reducing barriers of discrimination, such as income discrimination, that are critical for people of color; and offering emergency supplemental rent and utility assistance.

### **LOCAL EXAMPLES:**

**DECRIMINALIZATION AND ACCESS TO SERVICES:** In the absence of concerted federal or state action, and despite state preemption of inclusionary zoning policies, cities are seeking targeted, compassionate solutions to a growing crisis. They should decriminalize and reallocate resources into Housing First (aka Permanently Supportive Housing) policies, and increase access to counsel resources. **Tempe, AZ** was instrumental in creating the now countywide Homeless Court. The Maricopa Regional Homeless Court<sup>8</sup> resolves minor misdemeanors and victimless offenses in order to help individuals address underlying issues that may keep them from getting a driver’s license and securing a home and a job. **Greensboro, NC** has eliminated restrictive ordinances that prohibited panhandling under the application of First Amendment protection.<sup>9</sup> The city argued that street harassment was covered under a different ordinance. The city is also exploring a right to rest on publicly owned sidewalks when there are no more shelter beds.

**Philadelphia** launched an eight month Encampment Resolution Pilot to close homelessness camps with high rates of opioid abuse and relocate those who were evicted to private recovery houses or public housing. The city also prioritized access to services, and while this is a first step, it shows promise for other jurisdictions.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, in **Los Angeles**, the city is focusing on providing basic mobile services, such as shower trailers, for the homeless community at a fairly low cost.<sup>11</sup>

**AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND EVICTION PREVENTION:** Cities should continue to invest in affordable housing and eviction prevention measures. **Tempe, AZ’s** Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) program incentivizes construction of smaller housing units in the urban core, offering income potential for homeowners and affordability for renters.<sup>12</sup> In 2019, **Durham, NC** passed a \$95 million housing bond that

prioritized investments in affordable housing, homelessness prevention and public housing upgrades; specifically the city aims to move 1700 people into permanent housing.<sup>13</sup> Such city level investments, as informed by a comprehensive housing strategy, enable cities to address the housing affordability crisis at multiple levels. Cities such as **Oakland, CA** are developing landlord incentive programs to help maintain levels of Section 8 Housing.<sup>14</sup> Finally in **Denver**, the city’s new social impact bond program has proven successful in moving those who are homeless off the streets and into stable housing. A recent Urban Institute study concluded that 94 percent of participants remained housed one year after being leased-up.<sup>15</sup>

### **INTEGRATED APPROACHES**

**Tempe, AZ** relies upon a multi-pronged approach to help meet its goal of ending homelessness, including: street outreach through a HOPE team, inter-departmental collaboration, regional partnerships, and a citizen-led participatory democracy process that recommends human-service funding.<sup>16 17</sup> **Greensboro, NC** took a series of steps: allocating general fund dollars and combing with county dollars to create a 911 system, and embed front line mental health services for the homeless population; they also introduced an integrated care model in a building downtown location that offers showers, laundry facilities, and mail services.<sup>18</sup> They serve approximately 200 people a day<sup>19</sup> and the building units house those who are most vulnerable: working age single African-American men, many of whom were formerly incarcerated.<sup>20</sup> Nonprofits also co-sign with residents to use the voucher system run by the housing authority to ensure landlord participation.

### **LANDSCAPE & RESOURCES**

[The Homeless Rights Advocacy Project](#) at Seattle University Law School offers an extensive set of policy resources and briefs. [Coalition for Supportive Housing](#) focuses on the need to provide homes and care for the homeless. [The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty](#) focuses on establishing housing as a legal right. [Community Solutions](#) deploys problem-solving tools from multiple sectors to help end homelessness and the conditions that create it, particularly for veterans. [Housing not Handcuffs](#) focuses on decriminalizing homelessness, which perpetuates the crisis. Finally, VOCAL, Picture the Homeless and Coalition for the Homeless are organizational leaders in New York.

# ENDNOTES

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