HIGHLIGHTS

Current Research and Practices that Address Unsheltered Homelessness

There has been a growing awareness of recent increases in unsheltered homelessness and their visibility in public spaces. This has created a heightened urgency for communities to develop ways to address both the needs of homeless individuals and the concerns of the residents and businesses who share these public spaces. It has also led to questions about what the best ways are for service providers, police, first responders, and other stakeholders to address unsheltered homelessness.

The highlights in this document draw upon the body of research and policy literature that has emerged on this topic to summarize key aspects of unsheltered homelessness and effective strategies that address this problem on a local level. The key overall finding based upon available evidence is that adopting more humane, person-centered approaches produces more efficient and effective outcomes than the more punitive policies that are often used throughout the U.S.

UNSHELTERED HOMELESSNESS

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) estimates that, based on a one-night count in 2019, roughly one-third of the entire homeless population (at least 211,293 people) was unsheltered or sleeping in places not meant for human habitation. This estimate represents a 17 percent drop in the unsheltered population since 2007 but is also a 22 percent increase since the number of unsheltered homeless reached its low point in 2015.

Levels of unsheltered homelessness vary widely across jurisdictions. Cities on the west coast and in the south typically have higher proportions of their homeless populations in unsheltered circumstances when compared to northeastern and midwestern cities, and homeless services tend to be concentrated in urban areas and less available in rural areas.

The unsheltered population is highly heterogeneous

The unsheltered population is roughly three-quarters male, disproportionately comprised of Black and Hispanic people, but with a higher proportion of White people than are in shelters. There are high levels of persons with various chronic medical and behavioral health (psychiatric disability and substance use disorders) conditions, a substantial youth subpopulation, and a significant degree of turnover in the composition of this population. Local factors account for variations in the characteristics of unsheltered homeless populations across geographies. Families experiencing homelessness are less likely to stay in unsheltered locations.

A study by the California Policy Lab (see Further Reading section) that compared people in unsheltered situations to their sheltered counterparts found that the unsheltered population is older, and has substantially higher levels of health conditions and health care needs.

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They also had more frequently experienced incidents of abuse and trauma. Unsheltered circumstances not only exacerbate these conditions but also create additional barriers to accessing needed health care and related services. This goes at least some ways toward explaining increased levels of mortality and reduced life expectancy (in the low-60's age range) that researchers have found among the homeless population.

Persons who are chronically homeless are more likely to be unsheltered

While most of the unsheltered population is not chronically homeless, persons who are chronically homeless are more likely to be unsheltered. According to findings from the California Policy Lab study, "people with the longest experiences of homelessness, most significant health conditions, and greatest vulnerabilities are not accessing and being served by emergency shelters. Rather than receiving shelter and appropriate care, unsheltered people with major health challenges are instead regularly engaged by police and emergency services."

Persons who are unsheltered and chronically homeless do make use of services across a range of public systems, but this use tends to be inefficient and expensive. When they access health care, it typically involves emergency services and requires more extensive use of expensive services such as inpatient care. Interactions with law enforcement lead to arrests and processing, court appearances, incarceration, and supervision, which create a substantial cost burden when taken together. On the other hand, numerous studies[1] have indicated that placements into permanent supportive housing reduce the negative and inefficient uses of such systems to where the ensuing cost reductions offset a considerable portion, if not all, of the costs associated with the housing.

FOCAL POINTS FOR PUBLIC SPACE MANAGEMENT

There are particular focal points for public space management, where conflict often occurs between people experiencing unsheltered homelessness and other citizens and businesses.

1. Encampments
Encampments take on various sizes and characteristics, ranging from several people in a makeshift camp to settlements that can number into the hundreds. The larger the encampment or, the more central its location, the more attention it draws, and the more the pressure mounts to close it.

2. Vehicles as living facilities
A less noticed and quantified phenomenon has been that of individuals and households using motor vehicles (cars, vans, recreational vehicles, boats, etc.) as living facilities. The autonomy of mobile sleeping arrangements and storage for possessions offers advantages over other unsheltered provisions but can trigger local restrictions on parking and overnight sleeping.

3. Panhandling
While people who panhandle are not necessarily homeless, panhandling is associated with homelessness and, in many jurisdictions, gets treated as a homelessness problem. Thus bans can disproportionately impact homeless populations.

4. Other activities in public spaces
Homelessness involves spending more time in public places and usually without adequate access to facilities to meet basic needs such as bathrooms, places to eat, sit, or sleep. When the public objects to these activities and the conflicts remain unresolved, the default often becomes law enforcement, leading to "move-along orders," citations, and arrests for offenses such as sidewalk obstruction, loitering, disorderly conduct, and public urination.

PUBLIC SPACE MANAGEMENT

People who are unsheltered are often visibly living in public spaces, where their presence may become objectionable to some other people within the community. Businesses and residents may lodge calls and complaints with police and public officials. Law enforcement often responds with punitive or coercive approaches. This may involve enforcing ordinances against camping, sleeping on public benches, and other misdemeanor offenses for performing acts of daily living as a basis for move-along orders, citations, and arrests.

In contrast, inclusive public space management practices provide alternative approaches that better accommodate everyone, including people that are homeless. Different approaches that offer specific ways to do this have been developed for different contexts. For city parks, an example is the Seattle Parks and Recreation's provision of "concierge" positions in city parks—people who can develop relationships with park regulars and address situations between different park users that might otherwise lead to police involvement.

Consequences of Punitive Approaches

Displacement through move-along orders or arrest and citations for activities like sleeping, camping and "acts of living" laws are fundamentally unfair when individuals have no other reasonable alternatives, and prolong homelessness and increase the need for services from various public systems.
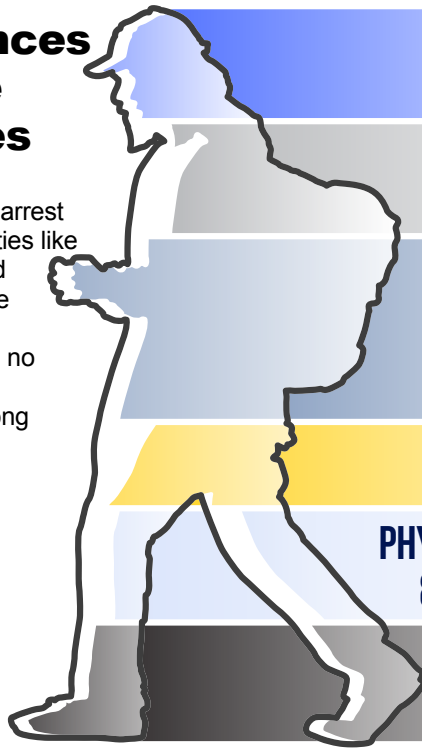
HUMILIATION & ANGER
A range of feelings — shame, humiliation, sadness, and anger — occur.

ALIENATION & DESPAIR
Further isolates individual from mainstream society and attenuates social connections.

FURTHER DESTITUTION
Destruction and loss of personal belongings and legal documents make it more difficult to escape homelessness.
Disruptions can lead to job loss and missed appointments.

TRAUMA
Exacerbates depression, anxiety, and other psychiatric symptoms.

PHYSICAL HARM & MORTALITY
The longer someone remains homeless, the greater the physical harm — and increased risk for premature death.

CRIMINAL RECORDS
Punitive interactions lead to arrests, fines, warrants and incarceration, and greater difficulty finding jobs and housing.

Examples of inclusive practices in the more general contexts of public parks and libraries come from the National Recreation and Park Association and the Public Library Association, respectively (see Further Reading section).

Punitive measures do lots of harm and little good

Citations come with fines and court appearances that, if missed, first lead to more penalties, new charges, and bench warrants, and may then become the basis for arrest and incarceration. The deepening legal complexity can interfere with housing, employment, health care, and services participation. Other harmful effects to those subjected to these punitive actions include

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trauma, frequent displacement, loss of personal property, and an increasing mistrust of community services.

There is no evidence that punitive measures decrease homelessness. Instead, punitive measures clog local legal systems and take resources that could potentially be redirected to more enduring solutions. In 2018, Los Angeles police arrested 14,000 people experiencing homelessness for life-sustaining activities that are categorized as low-level crimes in certain regions. San Francisco spent $20 million targeting people experiencing homelessness with laws against loitering, panhandling, and other quality of life offenses,[2] and in 2017 the majority of the 19,730 arrests (54 percent) in Portland, Oregon were of people experiencing homelessness (three percent of the overall population).[3]

SOLUTIONS-ORIENTED APPROACHES

Housing First

Housing First approaches can help people successfully move "from streets to homes" without preconditions. These approaches have shown success in placing and retaining people with long histories of homelessness and disability into permanent housing. A Housing First approach provides a framework for quickly getting people out of unsheltered living conditions and for prioritizing people with the highest needs and vulnerabilities for housing. Harm reduction practices are an essential component of Housing First approaches.
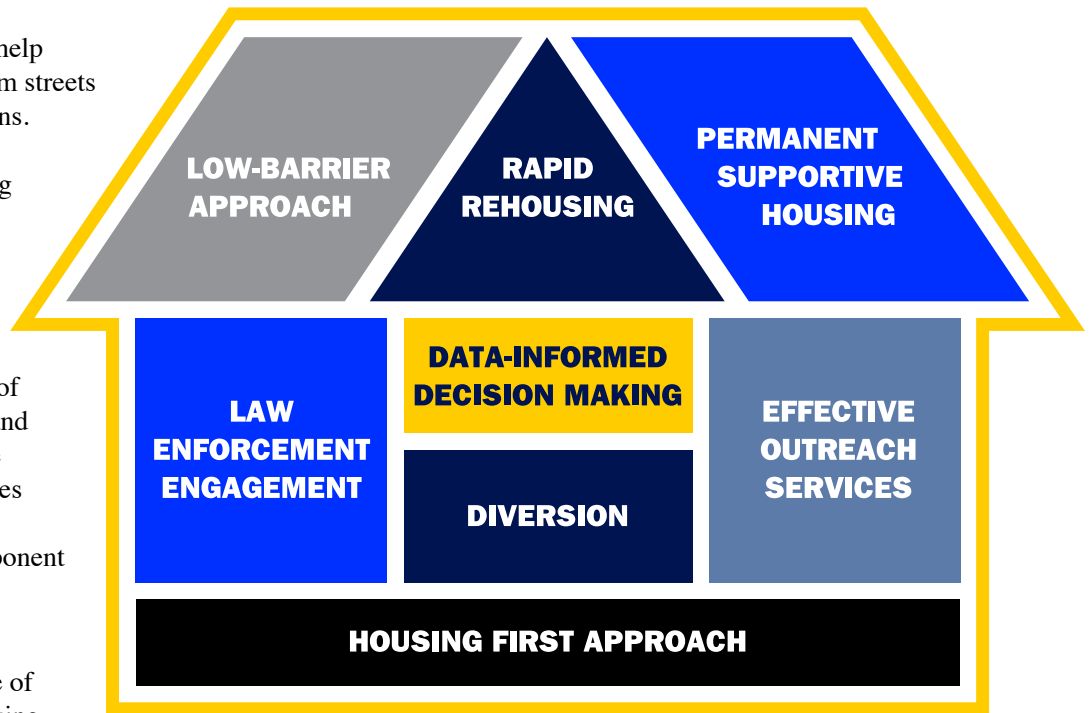
Rapid rehousing

Rapid rehousing is the practice of directly moving people to housing with time-limited rental assistance, with case managers working with them to put in place supports that will allow them to remain housed.

Low-barrier approach

A low-barrier approach provides temporary housing, shelter, and other services that "meet people where they are at"—allowing them to maintain a sense of autonomy while offering safety, assistance, and community. This type of approach applies to removing obstacles to entry into shelter and programs as well as obstacles like limits on the length of stay and participation in mandatory programs that conflict with job and other priorities. This approach has been effective in helping people move from unsheltered locations when the demand for housing exceeds the available supply.

Diversion

Diversion is a problem-solving approach that works with people to identify resources for housing arrangements that provide safe and sustainable alternatives to homelessness. Diversion may involve making informal living arrangements with family or friends, facilitating travel to destinations where

housing supports are available, or identifying resources to make a return to housing possible. It is most effective with persons who have recently become homeless but also provides an option when no immediate temporary or permanent housing is available.

Effective outreach services

Effective outreach services are a necessary component for all solutions to unsheltered homelessness. Effective outreach teams can locate, engage, and build relationships with people in unsheltered situations, identifying the barriers that may keep them from accessing services and laying the groundwork for providing access to the appropriate needed services.

Data-informed decision making

A variety of data can inform and evaluate solutions-oriented approaches by measuring outcomes and providing a means for coordinating services. Currently, most jurisdictions have both the means to enumerate the homeless population on a single night through the Point-in-Time (PIT) count process and to track longitudinal use of homeless services for subpopulations

and individuals through homeless management information systems (HMIS). In addition to these powerful tools, data from outreach and social services workers can be compiled to create a by-name list that records, follows, and profiles individual households through the process of getting rehoused. These data sources are often supplemented with data from other systems to more fully document the nature and extent of services used and to coordinate participation in other systems as part of facilitating exits from homelessness to housing.

Law enforcement engagement

Policing also looks different in non-punitive, solutions-oriented approaches to unsheltered homelessness than in traditional enforcement approaches. Police officers engage with persons who are unsheltered and homeless to connect them with services that assist with housing and other needs, taking positive action in resolving their situations. In order to do this, police collaborate with homeless services providers and adopt a more person-centered orientation.

LOW-BARRIER APPROACH

RAPID REHOUSING

PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

LAW ENFORCEMENT ENGAGEMENT

DATA-INFORMED DECISION MAKING

DIVERSION

EFFECTIVE OUTREACH SERVICES

HOUSING FIRST APPROACH

RESOURCES

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1   For an example, see Paula Goering and colleagues (2014). *National At Home/Chez Soi Final Report,* available at: https://www.mentalhealthcommission.ca/English/document/24376/national-homechez-soi-final-report

2   Joseph W. Mead & Sara Rankin. "Criminalizing Homelessness Doesn't Work" (June 20, 2018), available at: https://www.citylab.com/equity/2018/06/how-not-to-fix-homelessness/563258/

3   Melissa Lewis. "Take a deeper look at the numbers behind Portland police arrests of homeless people" (June 27, 2018), available at: https://www.oregonlive.com/news/erry-2018/06/79b61635fd4450/portland_homeless_arrests_data.html

SUMMARY

Communities experience positive results when they adopt solution-focused strategies to resolve unsheltered homelessness by aligning law enforcement and support systems with person-centered objectives. Nevertheless, many communities still take punitive approaches in attempts to drive away homelessness despite evidence this is ineffective, harmful, and expensive.

SOLUTIONS BASED ON EVIDENCE

Arnold Ventures (AV) is a philanthropic organization with the mission to invest in evidence-based solutions that maximize opportunities and minimize injustice. AV supported a study to identify practices and policies that promote alternatives to using punitive and enforcement-based measures as the primary responses to unsheltered homelessness. Project investigators conducted a three-day visit in spring–summer 2019 to each of nine sites for an in-person review of community-specific initiatives. The sites represent the major regions of the U.S. and include cities of different sizes as well as rural, suburban, and tribal areas and provide an array of different socioeconomic contexts and present different local housing market configurations.

Arnold Ventures