

A Systems Perspective on Addressing Homelessness

Background

A systems oriented viewpoint on homelessness

This piece endeavors to present a perspective on addressing homelessness from an integrated systems viewpoint. Making a large reduction in the incidence of homelessness in the United States requires getting to the root causes for the many different aspects. Addressing symptoms will largely be ineffective. However, the root causes tend to be quite deeply embedded in the current social structure. This paper endeavors to track down root causes and identify possible solutions suggested thereby.

A growing problem

The growth in the number of unsheltered homeless people in the United States is apparent to everyone today. On December 27, 2024 a report from hud.gov indicated that the number of homeless individuals in U.S. increased by approximately 18% during the past year. The total counted was approximately 770,000, but this number is regarded as a substantial underestimation. A recent estimate of the homeless population in California was 171,000 people. This is about 40,000 more than six years ago. Many cities are seeing burgeoning homeless encampments, often sited in their core downtown areas and significantly interfering with housed residents and businesses.

Societal costs of homelessness

There are major social costs of significant populations of homeless. Homeless people are regarded as harming, endangering, or interfering with the general housed population through their actions. Examples include setting either accidental or deliberate fires where they are camping, vandalizing public restrooms and other facilities, damaging tourism by aggressive or otherwise threatening interactions, committing crimes to support drug and alcohol addictions, and blocking access to businesses. Other examples include leaving used hypodermic needles where they endanger the public and contaminating streams with feces and trash.

Homeless people can incur large societally-borne costs, such as repeated emergency room visits, police interventions, incarceration, emergency shelters, and drug and alcohol recovery facilities. Homeless people need a wide variety of social services, such as physical and mental health care, and providing these services can be very expensive. Per capita, homeless people have extremely high costs to local governments compared with housed residents.

However, these costs are not generally tallied up in total terms and made public to support decision-making.

Homeless Populations

Different homeless populations have different characteristics and reasons for being homeless

There are a number of distinct populations of homeless people. The homeless are not a homogenous group. It is important to consider specific characteristics of each of these different populations.

- Some people are homeless because they simply can't find a place to live in their area. There are significantly more people in the area than there are suitable housing units available to live in. Such people may have perfectly good jobs and be functional in other respects but have to live in their car or couch surf with friends.
- Some people may have lost access to a previous housing situation for various reasons (e.g., as a result of a disaster such as a fire or a landlord ending their lease) and haven't been able to secure replacement housing. In locations subject to a broad disaster such as a mega wildfire, flooding, or a hurricane, there can suddenly be thousands of people in an area without housing.

- Some people, particularly women, including those with children, are homeless to escape domestic abuse and violence. They need support to avoid having to re-expose themselves to possible harm.
- Some people have been thrown out of previous housing due to family conflicts and similar situations.
- Some people are homeless because they can't get work due to factors such as a prior criminal conviction.
- Some people are homeless because they are undocumented recent immigrants who have not been able to obtain housing. They may want to avoid interaction with authorities for fear of deportation.
- Many homeless people are homeless because they are damaged in some characteristic way
 - Those who are mentally ill or mentally disabled.
 - Those with alcohol and/or drug use issues.
 - Those who are physically disabled.
 - Those who are societally disconnected (e.g., estranged from family and other sources of support).
 - Those who have never been socialized to behave in expected ways in society (including education, employment, relationships, self-care, etc.).
- Some identity groups are disproportionately represented among homeless populations, including LGBTQ+ people, some racial minorities, particularly Blacks and Native Americans, and some refugee groups.
- Many people are homeless due to insufficient money.
 - Some are simply unable to pay for housing of any kind.
 - Many don't receive enough money from all sources to afford the housing that is available.
 - Some have been impoverished by things like accidents, divorce, lawsuits, medical bills, etc.
- A fraction of homeless people choose to be unhoused, for various reasons.
 - Some people are allergic to restrictions. So, for example, they don't want to go to a shelter that will prohibit them from smoking, drinking, using drugs, having sex, bringing their animals, etc. Other shelters will require that they participate in religious services and will attempt to proselytize them.
 - Some are simply allergic to rules in general. They don't want to have other people tell them what they can and cannot do.
 - There is a group of generally younger people, sometimes referred to as Travelers, who choose to tour between locations reputed to be hospitable environments for the unhoused, as a lifestyle.
 - Some homeless people find acceptance, community, and mutual support in a homeless encampment that they can't get in the general society.

Providing support for people who are homeless by choice has different requirements than serving those who would be housed if they were able.

Note that homeless people are not only single adults. There are homeless families, along with many homeless single parents with children, and homeless minors.

Social biases

Homeless population demographics reflect social biases, such as biases against racial minorities (Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, etc.), biases against sexual minorities (LGBTQ+ populations), biases against the elderly, and biases against those with disabilities of various sorts, particularly mental disabilities and mental illness. There are also biases against those who are undocumented immigrants, as they are regarded as undeserving or less deserving of social services provided to citizens and documented immigrants. In addition, there are biases against those with poor or non-existent English language skills. There are biases against people whose appearance, attire, and hygiene does not meet social expectations.

The needs of each of the disparate populations are different

Working to meet the needs of the homeless has to take into account the reasons underlying why each group has become homeless. Actions that can restore one group to being stably housed and able to be reintegrated into society as productive members will not be effective for some of the other groups. There will inevitably be some

groups of the homeless that can't realistically be "fixed" with regard to the problem of homelessness. Goals should be to minimize the size of this population, to deal with people in this group as compassionately as possible, and to limit the adverse effects of their presence on the broader society.

Allocating resources across the different homeless populations

A perennial problem in dealing with the homeless is how to allocate available resources to get the greatest overall benefit for the costs invested. How should groups be assessed, to determine which homeless people get access to scarce shelter beds, treatment services, training, employment opportunities, etc.? There should be explicit principles guiding the allocation, and the principles should be justifiable when exposed to public examination. In addition to principles for allocating resources across groups, there should be principles for assessing individual cases.

Sources of the Problem

Simply not enough homes to go around

One major cause of unsheltered homelessness in the U.S. is the fact that the country has simply not built enough homes to accommodate its growing population, changing demographics, and geographic shifts. It has simultaneously failed to replace existing housing that has become unsuitable from age and other causes. Sufficient building needs to take place in areas that have growing populations, particularly locations with good job opportunities and other draws.

The homes that *are* being built are not well aligned with the needs, such as large numbers of affordable starter homes and homes that reflect current demographic changes such as the increase in the number of people living as singles and the reduction in family sizes.

Very importantly, there is a nationwide crisis in the affordability of housing. The overall cost of housing, considering all factors including purchase price, mortgage interest rates, insurance, taxes, and utilities, has skyrocketed in the past couple of decades. There are a multitude of reasons for this increase in the cost of housing to residents, including factors such as the mass acquisition of housing stock by private equity firms to obtain rental income.

When there are more people trying to live in an area than there are homes for them, there will inevitably be those that are homeless.

Rising gap between people's costs of living and their income

Particularly at the lower end of the scale, costs of living are rising faster than incomes. Furthermore, cost factors associated with housing appear to be increasing faster than any of the other aspects. People can't spend their entire income on housing-related costs—if nothing else, they have to eat. At some point, people find they simply don't have enough money to cover the set of costs to stay housed. When they can't pay the rent, they will be evicted. Homelessness cannot be solved without addressing the fundamental economic trends of rising costs of living and stationary income.

Population shifts

There are numerous areas in the United States where populations are declining due to changing economic bases and reductions in employment opportunities. The existence of available and affordable housing in these locations isn't particularly helpful for the homeless problem. Homeless people are mostly found in locations that are attractive to the general population, particularly cities with some affluence and high housing costs.

According to a 2023 U.S. News report, the 16 U.S. cities with the largest homeless populations as a fraction of total population in order were as follows:¹

¹ <https://www.usnews.com/news/best-states/slideshows/cities-with-the-largest-homeless-populations-in-the-us?onepage>

Oakland, California: 22.7 per 1,000 population, 20% increase 2020-2023
Seattle, Washington: 18.9 per 1,000, 20% increase 2020-2023
Los Angeles, California: 18.7 per 1,000, 12% increase 2020-2023
Sacramento, California: 17.6 per 1,000, 68% increase 2020-2023
Denver, Colorado: 14.1 per 1,000, 65% increase 2020-2023
New York, New York: 10.6 per 1,000, 13% increase 2020-2023
San Jose, California: 10.2 per 1,000, 3% increase 2020-2023
Las Vegas, Nevada: 10.0 per 1,000, 24% increase 2020-2023
Portland, Oregon: 9.9 per 1,000, 51% increase 2020-2023
San Francisco, California: 9.4 per 1,000, 7% decrease* 2020-2023 *Unsheltered
Fresno, California: 8.2 per 1,000, 23% increase 2020-2023
Miami, Florida: 8.1 per 1,000, 3% increase 2020-2023
Boston, Massachusetts: 8.0 per 1,000, 15% decrease 2020-2023
Minneapolis, Minnesota: 7.8 per 1,000, 9% increase 2020-2023
Long Beach, California: 7.6 per 1,000, 69% increase 2020-2023
San Diego, California: 7.4 per 1,000, 34% increase 2020-2023

The disappearance of housing for marginalized populations

In earlier eras, there were boarding houses and low-cost hotel-like accommodations for lower-income populations. These forms of housing have essentially disappeared. In addition, as new homes were built in growing areas, older homes in declining areas became lower in cost, particularly if they came to be in poorer condition.

Residential mental institutions were closed across the country in an effort to end the many abuses of patients that were observed to occur in them. However, replacement facilities with better care for the mentally disabled and severely mentally ill were never created. The result is that large numbers of mental patients were simply dumped on the street to fend for themselves.

Government-created public housing projects were created in a number of areas in the postwar period to house lower-income populations. Such facilities tend to be in areas that have declining economic conditions now and the projects have not been properly maintained. As a result, many have been demolished and those that remain are not desirable as housing options.

Relational poverty

In addition to material poverty (insufficient money), many if not most homeless people are suffering from what has been termed relational poverty. They are disconnected from the usual support of family, friends, and other personal connections that housed people typically enjoy. This can be due to a wide range of causes. The person may be rejected by family, or the person may be fleeing an unhealthy family relationship such as abuse. It is not enough to simply return people to some form of physical shelter. They need to be reconnected to human relations that are appropriate to their situation. In addition to financial capital, people need social capital as well. Many homeless people report a near total lack of nurturing relationships. Combined with the stigma and shame of homelessness, this produces great feelings of isolation and loneliness. There is a great need for social and community integration.

Shelters

Temporary shelters

Temporary shelter is a critical stopgap measure for the unhoused during severe weather (extreme heat, extreme cold, extreme precipitation, etc.). The lack of shelter for unhoused people in these conditions commonly results in deaths or severe health issues requiring hospitalization. However, temporary shelters address only a very limited part of the problem. It is not enough to provide shelter for short term severe

conditions only. People are back on the street when the temporary shelter is not open. Homeless people need access to full-time stable housing over the longer term. Such housing is critical for a person to have any chance of getting their act back together after a period of homelessness.

Longer-term shelters

Efforts are made in many areas to provide shelters for around-the-clock longer term stays, particularly for homeless families. It is a struggle to provide safe and legally-compliant shelters for homeless populations with all the appropriate facilities and services at a scale to meet the actual need.

Problems with shelters

Furthermore, shelters tend to have a long list of detractions that make homeless people reluctant to use them.

- Being crowded in and having to interact with other homeless people who have major problems of their own (particularly mental illness, anti-sociality, unpleasant affect, etc.).
- Exposure to other peoples' contagious diseases and things like lice, bedbugs, etc.
- The smell of unwashed people in close quarters.
- Noise and commotion making it difficult to sleep.
- Being judged and preached to by the organization providing the shelter, especially faith institutions.
- Not accommodating homeless peoples' animals (which they may have for protection, emotional support, and aid in panhandling).
- Prohibitions against smoking, drinking alcohol, doing drugs, having sex, etc.
- For undocumented immigrants, a heightened risk of arrest and deportation by immigration authorities.

Addressing Homeless Peoples' Real Needs

Some essential needs of unsheltered homeless people

There are a number of day-to-day essential needs that unsheltered homeless people must have addressed by a caring society. These include

- Access to decent restroom facilities.
- Access to safe drinking water.
- Access to facilities in which to shower and wash clothes.
- Access to food banks and other sources of food.
- Access to facilities to safely prepare and store food.
- Access to stores to obtain various other essential supplies, in addition to food.
- Cash with which to buy items not provided at no cost by food banks, etc.
- Secure storage for their possessions so they are not afraid of losing them.
- Access to charging facilities to charge electronics (e.g., cell phones).
- Access to Internet services (e.g., able to use public Wi-Fi).

Some longer term needs of homeless people

In order to have any hope of reintegration into housed society, homeless people have a number of administrative needs. These include

- Valid government identification (e.g., driver's license, social security card, Medicare card if applicable, passport, etc.). This is particularly a problem for homeless people who don't have valid U.S. citizenship.
- A mailing address where they can get physical mail.
- A bank checking account.
- A credit card account.

- A cell phone and a cell service account with a cell phone number.
- An email account.
- Relationships with capable advocates to help them navigate the institutions to work with.
- Relationships with social support personnel such as social workers trained to support the homeless.

Rehabilitation

The goal of a compassionate caring society should be to rehabilitate as large a fraction of homeless people as possible to enable them to rejoin housed society and stay housed without falling back into homelessness. For those homeless people who are simply not able to be rehabilitated for one intractable reason or another, the goal should be to make their lives less awful, particularly on an ongoing basis.

Unhelpful Societal Responses

Punishment

Many governments have attempted to deal with homelessness by punishing homeless people, including criminalization. Criminalization of homelessness is clearly inappropriate and counterproductive. Simply being too poor to afford housing, or too ill or disabled to be housed, cannot logically be a crime. Similarly, it cannot logically be a crime to fail to be housed if there is no housing available. Citing and fining homeless people who have insufficient money is counterproductive. Jailing people simply for being homeless does not make sense. Having law enforcement seize and destroy homeless peoples' possessions is simply cruel. What **is** legitimate to criminalize are acts that are independent of a person's housing status, such as assault, theft, dealing drugs, prostitution, trespassing, vandalism, etc. Obviously, people are not deterred from homelessness by the threat of punishment.

Shaming and condescension

Stigmatizing homelessness for people who are homeless through no fault of their own is not helpful. Similarly, condescension is inappropriate. Official hostility will make homeless people loath to cooperate in any efforts for rehabilitation and reengagement in the housed society. The homeless need to feel they are seen as people, worthy of respect for their basic humanity.

Harassment

It is common for officials to harass homeless people for being a public nuisance or inconvenient for business in an area by being too visible. This unfortunately does not foster cooperation by those being harassed.

Relocation

Clearing encampments that are in inconvenient locations for the society, without providing alternative places for the people thus displaced to live isn't very workable, either. Shoving homeless people to another location simply shifts the problem. It just makes homeless populations a problem for the new location.

Requirement for movement

Some jurisdictions limit the time a homeless person can stay in a given location and require them to constantly move. This is a great burden to lay on a homeless person, particularly one with mobility limitations, and has no discernable benefit.

Blocking access to facilities and resources

In many places authorities are identifying locations where homeless camping will be tacitly tolerated. In such locations, it's important that authorities not block access to needed facilities such as restrooms, trash receptacles, water, etc. The environments should not be unnecessarily hostile—e.g., polluted, noisy, without any shade, rough ground, etc.

Economic Factors Contributing to Homelessness

Larger socioeconomic system effects

Homelessness is partly a consequence of larger socioeconomic system effects. Income disparity in the U.S. continues to grow. People at the top tier are thriving, with ever greater levels of wealth. People at the lower tiers of the economic system are struggling. The costs of living for basic essential goods and services continue to increase. Wage-based pay is not keeping up. For example, increases in the minimum wage have not begun to match actual inflation in general living costs.

The systemic increase in housing costs

Housing is becoming more expensive in the U.S. across the board. In many areas, housing prices have skyrocketed. This is largely a consequence of inadequate housing supply to meet the demand. At the same time, mortgage interest rates have climbed to two-decade highs. The total monthly outlay for housing, both for ownership and rent, has increased greatly recently. Suitable land for building near where jobs and services are plentiful is scarce and increasingly costly. A basic problem is that the most suitable land has already been used. The alternative to sprawl is infill, which implies denser multi-family housing rather than single-family homes that most areas prioritize.

Zoning restrictions favor high value housing. Existing residents want to maximize their property values. Low cost housing is regarded as lowering adjacent property values. So they oppose affordable housing in their area.

The lack of affordable housing in general

One fundamental problem contributing to homelessness is the basic lack of affordable housing. In some areas, there is not enough housing available at *any* price to serve the area's actual population. So it is inevitable that some people will simply not be able to find a place to live.

Many areas that are growing have created only a fraction of the housing units needed to support their expanding population. Many factors contribute to this, such as shortages of buildable land in the growing locations, opposition from existing residents, and bureaucratic barriers to new housing construction.

It is critical to understand the incentives and dynamics in trying to make housing affordable. For example, rent control leads to all sorts of unintended consequences. Landlords tend not to invest in maintenance of rent-controlled units because they cannot recoup the investment.

Affordable housing is needed where people *want* to live. At a minimum, affordable housing needs to be close to jobs. In particular, affordable housing has to be close to a quantity of quality jobs that are available for people at the lower end of the socioeconomic scale, e.g., those with lesser education. Affordable housing needs to be available for the teachers, firemen, policemen, and service workers of all kinds that make a society function.

Affordable housing needs to be provided in conjunction with appropriate support services (schools, child care, shopping, health care, etc.) that residents can utilize when living there. Affordable transportation, particularly efficient public transportation with good routes and schedules, is another key factor.

Affordability in an area has to consider both the cost of housing and employment income. Low housing cost does not yield a societal solution if it is coupled with very low average employment income.

The U.S. has made an implicit choice to not allow substandard housing. We want all housing to meet minimum standards, effectively those of middle class residents. This policy is particularly true in locations where there are good quality jobs. Factors include square footage, number of bedrooms and bathrooms, heating and air conditioning, accessible green space, and many others. As a result, we put many obstacles in the way of creating low cost housing in growing areas.

Note that there is plenty of housing available in areas of the U.S. with declining employment opportunities and declining populations. There are locations that will give you a perfectly good house for free just so it can be occupied and maintained rather than stay empty and deteriorate.

In many cases, rent is more expensive per month than mortgage payments for an equivalent home. However, there are many up-front costs associated with a mortgage (e.g., the down payment, closing costs, etc.) that limit peoples' ability to buy. It is hard to save up the required capital without something like family assistance. Of course, renting has some burdensome financial requirements too, such as security deposits and first and last month's rent in advance.

Factors to be Considered in Addressing Homelessness

Homelessness can't be handled solely on a local level

Government jurisdictions need to collaborate broadly to address the problem of homelessness. The problem simply cannot be dealt with at a local level. Homeless people who are mobile network with each other and will move to locations that provide them the most favorable conditions. An area that invests heavily in providing services for a homeless population will find the size of the population increasing in response, in an amplifying feedback loop. Many services such as treatment for disabilities, mental health issues, alcohol and drug addiction, and the like are not amenable to being provided at a narrow local level.

Bureaucracies dealing with homelessness

Bureaucracies dealing with homeless people can make such people's problems much worse rather than better. Bureaucracies need to be carefully monitored and managed to make sure they are actually improving the situation. It's common for homeless people to regard the bureaucracies intended to support them as clueless and inept, if not actively sabotaging them. Actually fixing homelessness requires that the bureaucracies involved actually function effectively and compassionately to meet the real needs of the populations they are set up to serve.

One challenge to be addressed is to make sure that funds allocated to bureaucracies set up to deal with homelessness are applied in an efficient and effective way to really help homeless people. Otherwise the funds can be consumed supporting the bureaucracy rather than its clients.

Agency coordination and collaboration

All of the agencies and institutions interacting with homeless people in a general location need to coordinate their activities with each other, including sharing public and private funding appropriately.

Involvement of homeless people in the decision making processes

Homeless people need to have a voice regarding decisions that being made about them. They should feel they are being listened to and their views are being taken into consideration.

Income subsidies

Like everyone else, homeless people require cash to live in contemporary society. It is preferable that they get the needed money in an organized and dependable manner from public sources, rather than depending on begging or criminal acts such as theft, drug dealing, or prostitution. However, this income should not be provided in a manner to encourage dependency and free-riding. It should not be treated as an entitlement. Wherever possible, such income should be associated with making a positive contribution to society, in whatever form is possible for the individual. Paid employment should be the preferred option.

Overall costs of living have to be taken into account, not just direct housing costs

It is not enough to have sufficient subsidized income to just pay the monthly rent on a housing unit. There are numerous additional costs that must be covered to be able to have a livable arrangement for shelter, such as utilities, insurance, furnishings, etc. In order to rent, one typically has to be able to cover upfront costs

such as first and last month's rent, a cleaning deposit, etc. One may also need favorable references from one or more prior landlords. In addition, people need to cover non-housing related basic costs of living such as food, clothing, communications, transportation, and medical care. Support for the homeless needs to address all of these costs.

Earning an income to escape homelessness

Earning income from work, that is actually available, has to be more attractive than panhandling. Otherwise, people won't choose to work. Recognize that some people are simply not capable of holding a job of any sort, even though they would otherwise be physically and mentally capable of it. For example, they won't consistently show up for work or work a full shift. These people are not going to be employable in the private sector, ever. Some people have difficulty getting work due to having a criminal record. Some people have difficulty getting work due to being an undocumented immigrant.

In order to work at most jobs, a person has to have a permanent address, a social security number, a bank account, a working telephone, working email, and dependable transportation. Similarly, in order to work at most jobs, a person needs access to a shower and laundry facilities. Also, in order to work, people with children need dependable and affordable child care. Similarly, people with adult dependents (e.g., a disabled partner) need reliable adult care.

Unfortunately, there are some homeless people who simply don't want to work for an income, even when appropriate work opportunities are made available to them. Such people present particular challenges to support.

Differential incentive factors

If a location is seen to provide a high level of help to its homeless population, it will become a magnet drawing mobile homeless people from other areas that are less generous. This burdens areas that seek to be responsible towards their disadvantaged residents and lets other areas bear less of the social costs of homelessness.

Social equity

There tends to be resentment in the general population for providing generous support to people who are regarded as not deserving it. You can't privilege people who are unproductive by choice without incurring discontent in other people who have been diligently productive. It doesn't work to make housing an entitlement for one special group. If some people get quality housing without working for it, while others have to strive arduously to obtain housing of any kind, this creates a problem.

Public housing accommodations provided for homeless people at no cost or minimal cost should be decent but fairly Spartan, so as not to cause resentment by other populations. The goal should be for it to be regarded by all as transitional, a stepping stone towards something better as a result of rehabilitation.

Avoiding the problem

In the United States, governments have been trying to avoid the cost and difficulty of actually dealing with homelessness. Local governments try to move homeless encampments away from their locations so other jurisdictions will become responsible for the problem. "Out of sight, out of mind". However, making homeless populations someone else's problem does not make it go away.

Actually Dealing with the Problem of Homelessness

Demographics and housing

America's housing stock in general needs to be recreated to match the needs of current demographic profiles. More housing units are needed per capita when fewer people are living in multi-generational homes and more people are living as singles. Also, people are living longer, with reduced physical and mental abilities. People are living longer after retirement, and no longer have the regular income from their

employment. Some locations will lose population due to factors such as decreased livability from climate change, drought, and hazards. Others will lose population due to declining employment opportunities as local economies change. For example, rural farming areas, small towns, older manufacturing centers, and areas depending on resource extraction such as mining and logging are shrinking nationwide.

There are many bureaucratic barriers to building needed housing in the U.S. that should be addressed. These include things like overly restrictive building codes, excessive permit costs, arduous and time-consuming permit processes, and lack of public investment in needed infrastructure elements.

Characteristics of affordable publicly-owned housing

Most of the time, affordable publicly-owned rental housing can best be provided by well-designed multi-unit dwellings that minimize the amount of expensive land they occupy. Units can be small but use their space very efficiently. Services (e.g., laundry) and outdoor facilities can be shared. Vehicles might also be shared rather than individually owned. Some of the units should be designed to accommodate students, seniors, single parents, and people with disabilities, in addition to working residents. The units need to be well managed by professional agencies, preferably private not-for-profit agencies, to ensure all maintenance is kept up and the housing is prevented from losing value due to neglect.

The housing-first approach

Those locations that have actually succeeded in dramatically reducing their problems with homelessness have taken a housing-first approach. The very first priority is to get homeless people into some decent form of stable semi-permanent housing. Then all the other forms of support can be provided (mental health treatment, addiction treatment, training, etc.). Rather than requiring homeless people to meet qualification standards (e.g., sobriety) to access housing, the housing-first approach gets people into shelter as the first step in rehabilitation.

Maintenance of housing

Simply getting a person into some form of housing isn't enough, however. Housing has to be continuously maintained or it will deteriorate and become less and less livable. It has to be cleaned regularly, the trash has to be taken out, etc. In the longer term, things have to be repaired when they break, the place has to be painted periodically, the roof has to be replaced when it is aging, etc. Residents need to have a real stake, a feeling of ownership, to be motivated to be active in the maintenance of their housing. Unfortunately, many people who are prone to homelessness are not capable of doing this, for various reasons. Such people need to have ongoing assistance and supervision in this aspect. The challenge is in not creating an opportunity for residents to let someone else take on the burden of maintenance so they don't have to.

Institutionalization

In many of the cases of damaged people (e.g., the mentally ill, drug and alcohol abusers, those with cognitive and physical disabilities, the un-socialized, people with severe personality disorders), it is increasingly recognized that it is necessary to house them in institutional facilities and provide treatment, even if they resist it. There is a challenging balance between their individual civil rights and the protection of the broader society. Abandoning such people with severe damage to fend for themselves on the street seems unconscionable.

Prioritizing society's investment with regard to homelessness

Obviously, homelessness can't be resolved without there being sufficient housing units available to accommodate the people in an area. Like a game of musical chairs, there have to be enough places to land when the music stops, or it is inevitable that people are going to be left out. Some people with resources will be able to move to other locations where housing is available, but a substantial fraction will not.

The highest priority for the longer term has to be the creation of sufficient quantities of appropriate affordable housing. The private sector can't make a profit creating and maintaining affordable housing without subsidies, so governments have to be involved. The affordable housing has to be aligned with the needs of the different populations to be served.

The provision of affordable housing has to be closely coordinated with appropriate social services for particular homeless populations (e.g., the mentally ill, those suffering from substance abuse issues, people with dementia, etc.). As discussed previously, some homeless people are going to need to be re-institutionalized in facilities tailored to their real needs.

Public subsidization of housing to meet the needs of homeless populations

Housing created to serve the needs of people who are homeless cannot be built in a for-profit environment by commercial developers in the current world without some degree of public subsidization. Unless they receive appropriate subsidies, developers will use the land, building materials, labor, infrastructure services, permits, etc. to build housing that can be sold at market rates to maximize their return on investment. Generally this means public ownership of the housing being created for these needs. Public ownership of the asset requires that the public investment be vigorously and systematically maintained by the public authorities to keep its value. The housing cannot be allowed to fall into disrepair or become obsolescent.

An integrated systems approach to deal with homelessness

In the long run, there is no adequate approach except to address homelessness in an integrated systems-aware manner. Like any other complex problem, addressing homelessness involves many tradeoffs. To get one thing, you may have to give up on something else, or at least accept less of it.

Homelessness can't be solved on a local jurisdictional level alone. It needs coordinated action across all levels of government in the United States – municipal, county, state, and national. The costs of a response have to be appropriately allocated across the different jurisdictions so the funding can be provided in a balanced and effective manner.

If some localities provide plentiful resources to address homelessness while other localities do not, there will be an inevitable flow of mobile homeless people attracted to those areas with better options. Costs have to be distributed across different locations in an appropriate way.

A great deal of innovation is required, with contributions from the private sector, not-for-profit organizations, and governments at all levels. Faith-based organizations can have a role to play, but will be resisted by some of the people they are trying to help if they push their belief systems too strongly.

A national level commitment to create more demography-appropriate housing, and housing that is in fact affordable, is an inescapable requirement to address homelessness. This housing needs to be in the locations where there are meaningful employment opportunities and services such as good educational and medical treatment resources. Similarly, a national level commitment to create adequate community-connected treatment for mental illness and substance addiction is an inescapable requirement to address homelessness.

Timing

Providing suitable public housing designed to be affordable and meet the needs of people who are vulnerable to being homeless is a societal project that will take substantial time to bring about. Public agencies have to be realistic about the schedule for accomplishing this, particularly in terms of obtaining the financial resources necessary. In the meantime, public agencies need to be astute about providing interim responses to the problems of homelessness in their areas of jurisdiction. What can be done in the near term while working on the necessary actions to develop a long term solution?

Incentives

Addressing the problems of homelessness has to be based on an intelligent structure of incentives, primarily positive incentives. Incentives should guide those who are homeless. Incentives should guide those who are providing for the homeless. The structure of incentives should be aligned and consistent—with no perverse incentives inadvertently created!

Being housed should always be more attractive than living in an encampment. Earning an income at a productive job should always be more attractive than begging or various forms of illicit activity. Getting straight should always be more attractive than continuing to use drugs or alcohol. Getting treatment should

always be more attractive than continuing to deal with mental illness. Cooperating with authorities should always help you to be in line for more desirable housing. Getting training should always help you be in line for better employment. Being employed should not cause you to lose benefits of unemployment (such as child care).

At the same time, resources provided for support of the homeless must not cause the working housed population to feel their interests are being ignored or treated as less important.

Summary: The Bottom Line Regarding Homelessness

Homelessness cannot be solved until there are enough viable homes to go around in locations that have economic viability and growing populations. Such homes need to be affordable to people with modest incomes. Homelessness cannot be solved until there is effective and adequate treatment provided for people with mental illness, cognitive disorders, drug and alcohol addictions, and other disabilities. Homelessness cannot be solved until there is meaningful income-producing employment for those with limited skills. Homelessness cannot be solved until there is affordable child care available to parents so they are able to work. Homelessness cannot be solved while the society prioritizes funneling economic benefits to those at the top of the socioeconomic scale.

The uncomfortable fact is that for society to make a serious reduction in homelessness there will be considerable public costs to be borne. It can't be done on the basis of making a profit, and it can't be adequately addressed by private charity. It requires taxing the general population to support the overall physical and social health of the society, including all of its members. The key question is how a society prioritizes the needs of its most vulnerable populations. Homeless people are not going to disappear on their own; under current conditions their numbers are only going to increase. How compassionate is our society in reality?

Some references:

https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/Whats_the_Real_Reason_People_Become_Homeless?utm_source=pocket-newtab-en-us

<https://www.npscoalition.org/post/fact-sheet-cost-of-homelessness>

<https://theconversation.com/if-we-realised-the-true-cost-of-homelessness-wed-fix-it-overnight-143998>