



Can Homelessness in America Be Eradicated?

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Abstract: Homelessness, along with many other social problems, becomes a problem only when it becomes visible to the general public. Failure to address the less visible problems, such as a lack of homes for disadvantaged and marginalized populations, rising low-income rents, and unequal distribution of government resources, result in failures to mitigate homelessness. However, if we note which parts of the homeless population are most disturbing to civil society, and are most vulnerable, we may be able to find the resources and political will to build enough housing, along with supporting social services, to significantly reduce homelessness in America.

Keywords: Homelessness, Impediments to Mitigation, Steps toward Mitigation, Inequality, Marginalization.

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As Gandhi once noted, “The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.” Millennia later, G. Robert Watts (2021) applies this ancient maxim to the homeless: “Rights, justice, and equity are fundamentally ethical issues” when it comes to the homeless.

No people could be more vulnerable than the homeless, whose lives are cut short by 36%, approximately 30 fewer years compared to the average life expectancy of people with access to housing (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, January, 2021).

Such a life span disparity is the result of many deleterious health effects experienced by the homeless. For example, homeless people have a higher rate of illness and injury (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, February 2019). The homeless population is nearly twice as prevalent to have higher incidences of diabetes, heart attacks, and high blood pressure (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2016).

Substance abuse disorders are three times as likely, and depression and hepatitis C are six times higher among the homeless (2016). Finally, the US Department of Education points out that the health effects are especially troublesome to the 1.5 million children that go in and out of homelessness each year (National Center for Homeless Education, January 30, 2020).

Yet, despite how we might empathize with these hapless people, we continue to ignore them—until they become inconvenient. The homeless sleep in the New York City subways and along the sidewalks, and we ignore them. However, when they sleep on the steps of our museums and other hallowed destinations, and when they commit crimes against the city’s citizens, we are suddenly offended (Newman, Rubinstein, and Gold, February 18, 2022).

This same pattern, first ignoring and then awakening to the existence of the homeless, also occurs in other large cities.

Recently, homeless people were found dead on Los Angeles’ beaches, streets, and park benches (*The Guardian*, 2022). Then it comes as a shock to discover how many fewer years the homeless are expected to live compared to the rest of the population, 50 vs. 78 years (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2022).

In short, it bothers us less when these despairing people are out of sight in shelters. Yet, it becomes national news when the unsightly homeless are sleeping underfoot, and panhandling, loitering, littering, and threatening us when awake.

Mayor Eric Adams of New York City was criticized for using this justification for his administration’s “aggressive campaign to remove homeless people from the city streets” (Gay, April 16, 2022). Michael Gartland (April 7, 2022) also notes this pretense in his *New York Daily News* article when quoting Mayor Adams: “I can’t help but to believe that if Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were here today they would be on the streets with me, helping people get out of encampments.”

Our emphasis on the visible symptoms while ignoring the less visible root causes of homelessness can explain why so much attention is paid to the relatively miniscule problem of homelessness when compared to all the national problems we have to solve—poverty, environmental degradation, global warming, crime, wars, and pandemics.

After all, in 2022 only 550,000 people were homeless on any given day (Slasha, March 5, 2022). According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (December 15, 2023), this figure rose significantly in 2023 to 653,000, a shocking rise of nearly 19%. This is just under 2/10ths of one percent of America’s total population of 340 million. New York State itself has more than 92,000 homeless people on any given day, the second highest of any state, and yet this figure is only one half of one percent of the state’s population of 19.4 million (*World Population Review*, 2022).

Furthermore, according to Mara Gay (2022), approximately 50,000 people are homeless in New York City, which is still only one half of one percent of the city's population of 8.85 million. However, as Ms. Gay (2022) also notes, most homeless are "tucked quietly out of sight." Since most of these people, 45,000 or so, are in shelters, it is only the 5,000 who are on the streets who are causing the most alarm.

This information points toward the fact that the fear among middle class citizens occurs when the homeless, or any other group at the margins of society, interferes with their daily routines, and even threatens them with criminal behavior. Both begging and menacing harm to life and limb disturb the respectful behavior the majority of the people have come to value during their daily activities in public places.

How can we approach solutions to this problem? Can we take steps toward eradicating homelessness? The first point to note is that this goal is achievable. In fact, Mr. Watts (November, 2021) concludes, "We can largely end homelessness on a massive scale. To continue to choose not to do so is unjust and immoral." Secondly, in some regions of the country reducing the homeless population has already been accomplished to some degree (November, 2021).

As three examples, the public-private programs in Connecticut and Colorado have been successful in reducing homelessness (Connecticut State Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, and Colorado Department of Local Affairs). Reno, Nevada, has also been successful in reducing its homeless population by nearly 60% according to a recent Jim Carlton article in *The Wall Street Journal* (December 12, 2023).

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2023), Delaware and Louisiana have also shown improvement in homelessness, ranging from 47% to 57% decreases. Local nonprofit organizations have also made inroads in alleviating the homeless population without any government help. For example, the Lord's Place in West Palm Beach, Florida, has completed construction of a large facility that, according to CEO Diana Stanley, will bring a cornucopia of services under one roof to those who are either experiencing or are at risk of homelessness—estimated at more than 1,800 clients annually (Smith, November 6, 2023).

Overall, however, while there was an 8% increase in Americans exiting homelessness this past year, at the same time there was a 26% increase of people entering homelessness (2023).

The third point to note is that a number of closely linked social conditions are recognized by many to contribute to homelessness: unaffordable housing, poverty, disability, unemployment, alcohol and drug addiction, mental illness, exposure to violence, and extreme weather situations (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2022). The solutions to all of these problems are daunting, taking much time, money, and training.

However, if we are more realistic and at first only try to solve the housing shortages intersecting with all the other conditions, much could be achieved. Matthew Desmond (2016, 5) reminds us that "We have failed to fully appreciate how deeply housing is implicated in the creation of poverty."

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2022) has noted that solving the housing crisis for homeless people in America will take \$20 billion. To put this amount into perspective, the construction and annual operation of America's largest aircraft carrier comes to \$15 billion (*Insider*, 2022). Furthermore, \$20 billion is only 2-1/2% of our annual military budget of \$817 billion for this year alone (U.S. Department of Defense, 2022). Surely, we can find \$20 billion to build affordable housing for all of our homeless people. Even California has been contemplating legislation to spend \$12 billion on its homeless population of approximately 137,000 people (Office of Governor Gavin Newsom, May 11, 2021).

In addition to taking a relatively small amount from the military budget to eradicate homelessness, steps can be taken to reduce the inequitable distribution of tax dollars between the poor and the wealthy in this country. Here are a few examples of unequal policies that adversely affect the homeless specifically, and the impoverished more generally.

- 1) The National Low Income Housing Coalition (December 3, 2018) reveals that the "federal budget authority for housing assistance has declined by more than \$75 billion in real dollars since 1978-79," and that this housing shortage continues through the present day.
- 2) The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (July, 2021) states that "3 in 4 low-income renters needing rental assistance do not receive it." Furthermore, Mr. Watts (November, 2021) asks us to do this: "Compare that to tax subsidies promoting home ownership—almost all of which go to wealthy Americans, are available to everyone who qualifies, and exceed \$200 billion per year—to see a clear example of inequitable policy and practice."

If all of this money seems too much to reallocate more fairly from the military budget and housing policies to those who are seen by many people as being the cause of their own troubles, and who are therefore undeserving of society's largesse, then perhaps we might only focus on those who are not in shelters, the ones who are deemed to be most visibly threatening to society.

In 2022, this came to about 35% of the homeless, or 193,000 people, who slept on the streets, in subways, abandoned buildings, and other places not meant for human habitation (Slasha, 2022). Most of these people were single men who seemed to perpetrate most of the unwanted interactions with the average citizen (2022). In addition to these people, from a moral standpoint we might want to build or find housing for the 171,000 most vulnerable individuals who represent 30% of the homeless who live in families with children (2022).

Putting these two populations together, is it possible to see our way clear to finding the resources to house 364,000 people, 65% of the homeless population? If we assume four people in every house, then only 90,000 houses need to be built. We know this can be achieved since in one year alone Habitat for Humanity has built and rehabilitated homes for 50,000 people (Habitat for Humanity International, 2021). Since most of the homeless live in five states (*World Population Review*, 2020), homes only built there would house most of the single men and family homeless populations in America.

Habitat for Humanity spends about \$115,000 to construct a house and another \$10,000 per year for mortgage and taxes (2021). This means that \$11 billion is needed to house this

population for a year. This leaves \$9 billion to provide long-term services to help these people with mental and physical conditions and addictions; education and job training; job applications and interviews; household budgeting, and information about diet and food preparation. After these tasks are underway, we will be able to assess to what degree homelessness can be eradicated and prevented.

Following Gandhi, perhaps the ultimate ethical foundation for why we must attempt to help the homeless is suggested by Mara Gay (2022) of New York City: “People experiencing homelessness are our neighbors, valuable members of this city who have the same human potential as anyone else.”

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