

The Root Cause of the Homelessness Crisis

Researchers at UC San Francisco have released the largest representative survey of homeless people in more than 25 years.

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Thirty percent of the American homeless population and 50 percent of its unsheltered population live in California, more than 170,000 people total. Homelessness is [primarily a function](#) of the broader housing-unaffordability crisis, which in turn is primarily a function of how difficult local governments have made building new housing in the places that need it the most.

[Pundits](#) and [politicians](#) routinely claim that the California homelessness crisis is actually a result of people moving from other states for better weather or better public benefits. But new research casts doubt on this theory. Last month, researchers at UC San Francisco released the largest representative survey of homeless people in more than 25 years. It comprises survey data from 3,200 homeless people in California and in-depth interviews with more than 300 of them.

The overwhelming majority of homeless people surveyed were locals, not migrants from far away: 90 percent lost their last housing in California, and 75 percent lost it in the same county where they were experiencing homelessness. Of the 10 percent who came from elsewhere, 30 percent were born in California. Most of the others had familial or employment ties, or had previously lived in the state.

Taking a step back, the idea that tens of thousands of people move to California after becoming homeless makes little sense. Moving is expensive. People who lose their housing rarely have the means to transport themselves, their families, their pets, and their belongings across the country. Setting that aside, homelessness makes people vulnerable. The first instinct is not to move to new terrain, but to remain near family and friend networks as well as potential job opportunities.

Researchers were careful to determine respondents' origin without priming them to give any one answer. "We didn't say, 'Hey, are you from California?'" Margot Kushel, the

lead researcher on the study and the director of the Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative, told me. She said respondents were asked to go through their life history, explaining the circumstances that led to their homelessness. Along the way, they were asked to clarify key geographic details.

For instance, here's one exchange she shared with me:

Interviewer: And how old were you back then, when [you first lost your housing]?

Respondent: I was 33.

Interviewer: Thirty-three, okay. And that was out here, or where?

Respondent: That was actually in Pomona, in California.

Interviewer: Pomona, okay. And then did you stay out there the whole time? What happened after you became unhoused out there? What was your transition?

Respondent: Well, I kind of bounced around a little bit, but not really geographically a lot. I kind of bounced around just because, like I said, I didn't know how to navigate homelessness at all. I'd never been homeless before. I didn't feel well. I'm trying to find places to sleep. Every time they'd shoo you away, you're kind of, "Okay, well, I can't sleep there, so I'll go here." So, that's kind of what happened. I ended up in a city called Claremont ... There's another Claremont that's actually near Pomona. And so that's where I [was] staying and kind of bouncing around between Pomona and Claremont, Ontario, [Chino], that area. It's not very big geographically, but it's technically different cities.

Here's another:

Interviewer: Where were you living before [you became homeless]?

Respondent: San Bernardino, California. My mom's five-bedroom home. She lived there for 50 years and 14 days.

Interviewer: Your mom's house, okay. You left that house to come back here.

Respondent: Just walked away.

Interviewer: Is it because she passed away?

Respondent: No, because my family were being demons and being horrible. We were supposed to be mourning her, and they just came to see what they could get from the house and stuff. So, I just left, because that is not the way it is supposed to be. My brother hospitalized me three times for taking care of my mom, beating me up and

stuff. I forgive them; I want to move on. Being homeless is just a pit stop; you recharge your car, recharge and get back on the road. The best part of my life is the next part of my life. That's it.

And here's another:

Interviewer: So how did you end up out here? So you were in Texas; you had a house.

Respondent: I had a house. I got cancer, kidney cancer. I lost my job, lost my house ...

Interviewer: What were you doing in Houston—what kind of work?

Respondent: I was a truck driver for 20 years.

Interviewer: And how did you end up out in California, then?

Respondent: I'm from California originally. So I came back home.

California is *home* for most of its homeless population. The most frequently reported reason for loss of housing was reduction of income due to unemployment or a decrease in work hours. Economic reasons were followed by two social ones: conflict among residents, and concerns about imposing on roommates or family members. These social reasons would, in a more affordable environment, lead simply to a change of address, not homelessness.

Preventing homelessness by identifying at-risk people in advance is uncommonly difficult. That's in part because the universe of people in unstable situations is much larger than the universe of people who actually lose their home, and also because, as the report revealed, when people do lose their home, that happens very quickly. Respondents who were on a lease had a median of 10 days' notice that they would lose their housing. And the 60 percent not on a lease reported a median of just one day. That's not much of a grace period to contact social services for assistance.

Kushel stressed, however, that some homelessness is predictable. Many people enter homelessness from prison or jail—fully 19 percent of respondents. What's more, 67 percent of those respondents were homeless when they went to jail. Yet less than 20 percent reported receiving benefits, health care, or housing support when exiting. Stopping that new flow of homeless Californians is "a no-brainer," according to Kushel: "We know where people are; we know what's going to happen to them."

Once people have lost their home, getting into a new one is extremely challenging; respondents reported a median of 22 months since the last time they'd had housing. Nearly 90 percent of respondents said housing costs affected their ability to get out of homelessness. One respondent said, "I've tried to look for apartments on my own, but I

wanted to make sure that I could afford them. And most of them, they want three times the rent. And just for studios or one bedrooms out here, it's \$1,100, \$1,200, just for that alone. I'm like, 'Whoa,' you know? So that means I'm going to have to make \$3,300. And I wasn't making that. And I'm not going to be making that anytime soon."

More than half of respondents said the housing they *could* afford was way too far from jobs or medical care, unsafe, unserved by public transportation, or too far from their children or families. Respondents also mentioned obstacles such as housing discrimination, lack of support in finding suitable affordable housing, years' long wait times for housing, lack of housing vouchers, and substance abuse—including drug use to stay awake and vigilant on the streets.

Homelessness is like slowly tumbling down a hill. Immediately after someone falls (or loses their housing) is the best time to help: *before* they've experienced traumatic and destabilizing events. *Before* they've developed or worsened a substance-abuse problem. *Before* they've exhausted all the help their family and friends are willing to give. *Before* they've been late to work too many times, or shown up without clean clothes.

But even a well-functioning, well-funded homelessness apparatus that intervenes early will fail at ending the crisis of homelessness, because the crisis of homelessness is a crisis of *homes*.

What does the median price of a house mean to someone who is about to be evicted from an overcrowded apartment he shares with extended family? A lot, actually. A housing chain connects low-income housing, middle-income housing, and high-income housing. When new market-rate units are first made available and people move into them, that frees up space in the homes they previously lived in, which are usually older. When new housing *isn't* brought to market, high-income residents turn to older units, bidding up the price. In turn, middle-income workers turn to lower-income housing units, and everyone at the bottom crowds together in a dwindling stock of affordable housing until someone loses their spot.

Every day that California and other expensive states across the country delay in building more housing is another future family turned out onto the street.

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"The problem is whether the American people have honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their own Constitution."

Frederick Douglass