

REIMAGINING PUBLIC SAFETY

RPS ISSUE BRIEF SERIES: Unhoused Persons

This brief is part of a series on different types of community issues and complaints to which police are asked to respond. In each brief we discuss the nature of the issue, review traditional policing strategies, and explore opportunities to adopt novel approaches.

Top Takeaways:

Homelessness in the United States is primarily attributable to the undersupply of affordable housing. Despite this, many jurisdictions address homelessness through policing strategies, primarily via the adoption and enforcement of punitive anti-homeless laws. Such strategies have proven harmful to the unhoused and ineffective in improving public spaces.

In the absence of an affordable housing ecosystem, alternative practices that deemphasize the role of police in responding to the symptoms of poverty are promising:

- Establishing teams of **community first responders**

who respond to 911 calls for service concerning people experiencing homelessness in lieu of a police officer response.

- **Improving officers' response** when they come into contact with people experiencing homelessness via community collaboration, posting advance notice of sweeps, or formal training regarding the local social services and housing landscape.
- **Establishing homeless outreach teams** collaboratively with community-based organizations to reach individuals living outside and who may be in need of services and support.

What Drives Homelessness?

According to the most recent Federal Bi-Annual Point in Time Count, on a single night in January 2020 there were 580,466 homeless individuals in the United States, of whom about 40 percent were counted as unsheltered or residing in vehicles.¹ In any given year, it is estimated that 1.25 million individuals experience homelessness for some period of time.²

While a disproportionate number of people experiencing homelessness also experience mental and behavioral health challenges, only a minority of the unhoused suffer psychotic disorders or severe drug and alcohol abuse.³ Instead, homelessness primarily is attributable to the lack of universal healthcare,⁴ mass incarceration,⁵ welfare austerity,⁶ and – above all – an undersupply of affordable housing.⁷ Researchers have tested a range of conventional beliefs about what drives homelessness, including mental illness, drug use, poverty, weather, generosity of public assistance, and low-income mobility, and find that none explain regional or community variations in rates of homelessness.⁸ Instead, housing market conditions, such as the cost and availability of rental housing, offer the best predictor for housing insecurity.⁹

The Traditional Police Response

Homelessness intersects with several other societal, economic, and behavioral challenges that directly or indirectly generate calls for policing. In confronting homelessness, jurisdictions often seek to advance two distinct priorities: 1) the material, medical, psychological, and social welfare needs of the unhoused, and 2) the expectations and interests of other residents and business owners, for whom visible homelessness may raise concerns about the real or perceived safety of public spaces, commercial districts, and other areas linked to overall community health. This issue paper will focus on the second priority, as the first requires a broader policy discussion. Instead, alternatives to homelessness, as discussed here, will focus on diverting 911 calls from the traditional police response.

Faced with the demands of a public often frustrated by the prevalence of visible homelessness and its secondary effects, many jurisdictions have pursued a strategy that relies purely or primarily on policing and the adoption and enforcement of anti-homeless laws.

Vagrancy and Anti-Camping Legislation

Vagrancy laws long empowered police to manage the down-and-out, but in 1972 the Supreme Court ruled that it was unconstitutional to punish individuals under vague laws targeting ‘vagrants’.¹⁰ This led many cities to restrict a variety of behaviors associated with homelessness, including panhandling, sleeping in parks, and sitting on sidewalks.¹¹ A more recent growing trend is the adoption of anti-camping ordinances and bans on tents, ordinances that are spreading at an unprecedented rate.¹² According to the National Homelessness Law Center, between 2006 and 2016, bans on sitting and lying increased by 52 percent, camping by 69 percent, loitering and loafing by 88 percent, and living in vehicles by 143 percent.¹³ Their most recent report shows these trends continuing.¹⁴

Enforcement of such laws inevitably places police at the fore in interacting with and addressing the circumstances of homeless individuals. Similarly, police often are tasked with enforcing other restrictions, such as those relating to public alcohol or drug use, threatening behavior, or mental health crises – laws

that are not on their face related to homelessness, but may nonetheless disproportionately affect the unhoused.¹⁵

The above strategies have serious negative consequences for those experiencing homelessness and have proven to be unsuccessful. Negative consequences include adverse health outcomes, traumatic stress, and disconnection from much-needed services.¹⁶ Even simple move-along orders and sanitation sweeps can result in the loss of medicine, identification needed for benefits, and protection from the elements.¹⁷ The negative impacts on the unhoused fail to be counterbalanced by any broader community benefits. On the contrary, an enforcement-forward strategy, whether proactive or reactive to complaints, is likely to fail in its supposed objective of reducing visible homelessness. In a UC Berkeley survey of individuals experiencing homelessness, survey participants were asked where they relocated following their most recent move-along order. Only 9 percent of respondents reported moving indoors. Of these, some reported moving to drop-in centers, but the most common responses were moving to a public library or taking a ride on the bus – indoor spaces that are both public and limited to daytime hours. Meanwhile, 91 percent of respondents remained on the streets or in parks, simply moving to a new outdoor location. The primary reaction to a move-along order was simply to walk down the street or circle the block and then return after the police had left – a tactic employed by 64 percent following their last displacement.¹⁸

In addition to adversely affecting individuals experiencing homelessness, policing is an ineffective tool in addressing homelessness more broadly. By their own admission, the police have stated that they are not trained and ill-equipped to help homelessness but are tasked to address social disorders in the absence of other options.¹⁹ San Francisco’s experience is instructive. Nearly 90 percent of the 10,000 to 15,000 citations given to homeless people annually in San Francisco for sitting, camping, or loitering go unpaid. This is unsurprising given the poverty of individuals cited.²⁰ These unpaid citations nonetheless result in late fees, arrest warrants, and suspensions of driver’s licenses – erecting multiple barriers to employment, housing, and services.²¹ Additionally, according to a Budget Legislative Analyst report for San Francisco, unsheltered homelessness increased by 19 percent

between 2017 and 2019, a period that coincided with an *intensification* of resources assigned to the policing of homelessness in the city.

Also of note is the fact that people of color experience homelessness more often than their white counterparts – Black people are counted as 41 percent of the unsheltered population nationally, while comprising just 13 percent of the general public.²³ Even if anti-homeless laws and enforcement strategies are notionally race-neutral, the policing of homelessness disproportionately exposes Black people to the trauma and the criminal justice system.²⁴

Therapeutic Policing

In order to address the deficiencies noted above, some jurisdictions have adopted a strategy of *therapeutic policing*, a tactic in which officers use the threat of arrest or citation to compel individuals to accept various social services.²⁵ Although intended to improve homeless people’s lives through “coercive care,” real-world outcomes fall far short of this objective.²⁶

Research on therapeutic policing efforts in Los Angeles demonstrates this. In the Skid Row area, therapeutic policing intensified negative punitive outcomes, with scant evidence of greater rehabilitative benefits for the unsheltered.²⁷ And L.A.’s Safer Cities Initiative – inaugurated in 2005 and discontinued in 2014 – can be read as a case study in the failure of the practice, which utilized homeless courts and diversion programs, yet resulted in historic numbers of arrests and no discernable increase in the number of people receiving meaningful services.²⁸

Furthermore, bundling shelter with policing through diversion programs or ultimatums such as, “go to jail or go to shelter,” has been found in most cases to:

1. Displace and reduce the number of shelter beds that had previously or would otherwise be available on a voluntary basis for those waiting; and
2. Shift shelter prioritization away from social worker referrals based on the needs of unsheltered people, and toward referrals based instead on sweeps determined by police, sanitation teams, or resident and business complaints.

Because most jurisdictions do not have sufficient shelter supply to meet demand, it is important that high *voluntary* demand be met *before* experimenting with compelled diversion to shelters.

Improved Police Response

Despite the advantages of alternative response, certain jurisdictions still might choose to rely on police to address or play a role in homelessness-related issues. If this approach is preferred, then several measures can improve upon ineffective traditional policing strategies. These include:

- 1. Collaboration:** Collaboration between law enforcement and service providers in the behavioral, health, and social service fields can limit the number of arrests for non-violent offenses, while also helping link individuals experiencing homelessness to the system of care and permanent supportive housing. For instance, [Ambassadors of Hope](#) is an organization consisting of several small teams of outreach workers, Philadelphia police officers, and/or community service representatives. The teams address the root causes of homelessness by rebuilding low-income neighborhoods and helping homeless populations find housing. Over the course of five years, the outreach teams helped over 800 unsheltered individuals find shelter or housing or receive treatment.²⁹ However, collaboration in and of itself may not guarantee improved outcomes, and it is critical to evaluate such efforts not simply in terms of the reductions of tents or increased number of camp clearances, but in meaningful outcomes: long-term shelter or housing placements; behavioral, mental, and medical care; and other needs-based metrics.
- 2. Advance notice of action:** Expert practitioners have outlined best practices for resolving encampments, which include extensive outreach over several weeks prior to clearance, providing ample and accurate notice to all those on-site, and, most importantly, providing shelter or housing options that meet the needs of camp residents.³⁰
- 3. Alternative justice systems:** Strategies that provide alternatives to prosecution and incarceration show an increase in the likelihood

that people will connect to permanent housing and employment. This solution includes the use of specialty courts, citation dismissal programs, holistic public defenders' offices - those that focus on providing wraparound supportive resources for the client and the office at large, and reentry programs.³¹

4. Blanket dismissal of fines/fees: Jurisdictions should consider instituting blanket dismissals of all fines/fees for unpaid citations for anti-homeless ordinances and/or online and in-person amnesty options for receiving a variety of social services. This approach was instituted recently in San Francisco through the Treasury Department's Financial Justice Project. Although the ideal approach is to provide housing for homeless populations, this initiative exists as a harm reduction approach providing some benefit.

5. Officer Skills/Training: Training can be better integrated into police academy programming, specifically regarding the structural causes of homelessness and the nature and operations of the region's shelter, behavioral and mental health, emergency room, welfare, and public health systems. This enhanced instruction and exposure could help officers view their actions in context of the wider social services landscape and understand the barriers people face in accessing resources.³²

Although these approaches may help mitigate the harm of using the police to intervene in homelessness, they still don't reduce the amount of time the police are spending on concerns that would be better addressed by other specialists.

Alternatives to Police Response

Expansion of housing choice vouchers, supportive housing, and funding to construct diverse forms of affordable housing would greatly reduce homelessness and related demands on police. But until a sufficient quantity and type of housing is provided, policymakers must grapple with the impacts of housing undersupply. Here are some existing approaches that are more effective than traditional punitive police engagement.

Community First Responders

The most successful models shift responsibility for addressing homelessness and related conditions from the police to community first responders. This model originated with the Crisis Assistance Helping Out On The Streets (CAHOOTS) program, launched in Eugene, Oregon in 1989. CAHOOTS reroutes 911 calls associated with homelessness and behavioral health-related issues toward small teams made up of a crisis worker and a medic, rather than armed police officers. The teams rely on trauma-informed de-escalation and harm reduction techniques to provide a non-violent resolution to crisis situations.

CAHOOTS handles calls involving homelessness, mental health crisis, conflict resolution, wellness checks, suicide threats, and substance use (when other more serious crimes are not also involved). These call types amount to approximately 17 percent of all 911 calls in Eugene. During the last year, police backup was requested only 150 times out of roughly 24,000 CAHOOTS calls.³³ Since CAHOOTS' introduction, several cities have adopted or considered similar programs, including Hartford, Oakland, Denver, Austin, San Francisco,³⁴ and Portland.³⁵ These additional programs illustrate the model's positive value:

- According to a recent evaluation, Portland Street Response (PSR) responded to 903 calls in its first year, which resulted in 405 service referrals, including nine housing placements and zero arrests.³⁶ The program demonstrated success in meeting outcome goals set by the city to reduce the number of calls typically responded to by police. PSR also reduced the number of behavioral health and non-emergency calls responded to by police and fire, and reduced the number of non-life threatening 911 calls resulting in an ER transport.

Homeless Outreach Teams

Meeting people where they are is a critical component in reducing homelessness. In order to connect with those living on the streets, many jurisdictions partner with community-based organizations to operate homeless outreach teams. These teams - typically comprised of social service providers, peer specialists,

or other related professionals – seek out unsheltered people in public places to offer services instead of requiring clients to acquire support in more formal settings. Outreach staff can provide a variety of resources, including mental health and substance use treatment, shelter, and, in some cases, emergency supplies (e.g., food, socks, feminine hygiene supplies, etc.). Unfortunately, the resource that is most needed – safe, affordable housing – is often unavailable.

The Intensive Mobile Treatment Program (IMT) in New York City focuses on homeless individuals that have had frequent contact with mental health and criminal justice systems, offering medical, social, material, logistical, and spiritual resources to some 800 clients.³⁷ The program consists of 31 teams funded by the city and implemented by local nonprofit organizations, with a plan to add five more teams servicing an additional 135 people.³⁸ Importantly, New York City tracks key data metrics and makes them available through a publicly available portal.

Thirty percent of IMT’s clients have been housed while enrolled in the program, and research demonstrates that they are also less likely to be reincarcerated.³⁹

The impact of IMT demonstrates how alternatives to traditional police responses for homelessness can have positive outcomes for unhoused populations. Community outreach efforts to address homelessness not only help reduce the time that police officers would otherwise spend addressing the unhoused population, but they also connect unhoused populations with specialists who are better equipped to meet their housing and behavioral health needs.

Concluding Thoughts

Ending homelessness and adjacent effects will require sustained, creative focus across multiple fields of public policy and administration. Police traditionally have played an overly large and too-often counterproductive role in meeting this challenge, but alternative models have shown promise. Community welfare broadly and public safety specifically can best be advanced by reconsidering the responsibilities of the police and ensuring that law enforcement is not our primary strategy for addressing complex social issues.

Endnotes

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