



# Beyond the Bias: Realities of Homelessness in California

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The homelessness crisis in California and throughout the United States is the direct consequence of inadequate housing policy, and yet, homelessness is consistently misrepresented as the result of poor personal decisions made by individuals in extreme poverty. The myths about homelessness disproved in this brief have skewed the public's perception of the crisis, leading to widespread contempt toward the unhoused members of our community, and delaying the implementation of effective policy changes. In order to institute necessary, sustainable housing and homelessness policies, it is crucial to dispel these myths and improve the public's understanding of why our neighbors are experiencing homelessness.

There is well-documented, long-term consensus among research institutions that these myths about homelessness are harmful and untrue. Institutions such as the National Low Income Housing Coalition,<sup>1</sup> Portland State University's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative,<sup>2</sup> New York University,<sup>3</sup> the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness,<sup>4</sup> and the Coalition for the Homeless<sup>5</sup> have all published similar myth-busting documents that disprove popular misbeliefs about homelessness. However, false narratives about the crisis continue to impact our policy decisions.

The way we talk about homelessness today affects who has access to housing tomorrow. The deliberate construction of popular myths and social narratives through issue framing is a powerful political tool that impacts policy formulation and implementation. Government officials, media coverage, public discourse, and popular culture collectively frame public policy issues, which directly influences how people think about potential solutions to our society's problems. Socially constructed ideas about who is deserving of resources often determines whether these populations are given the services they need.<sup>6</sup> The dehumanizing, victim-blaming narrative of poverty and homelessness is particularly harmful because it leads people to believe their unhoused neighbors are undeserving of support, diminishing interest in long-term solutions to this crisis.

Instead of providing necessary resources proven to prevent and alleviate homelessness, many policymakers favor punitive, anti-homeless laws that create additional barriers to housing. Criminalizing homelessness through citations, move-along orders, and the destruction of property deepens socioeconomic and health inequity without alleviating homelessness or reducing social disorder.<sup>7</sup> This penalization of homelessness systemically prevents unhoused individuals from accessing

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<sup>1</sup> NLIHC 2019

<sup>2</sup> Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative 2024

<sup>3</sup> Polner 2019

<sup>4</sup> Canadian Observatory on Homelessness 2021

<sup>5</sup> Coalition for the Homeless n.d.

<sup>6</sup> Schneider & Ingram 1993

<sup>7</sup> Herring, Yarbrough, & Alatorre 2020

services, employment, and housing, in addition to negatively impacting their health, safety, and overall well-being, ultimately prolonging the crisis.<sup>8</sup>

California's housing and homelessness crisis cannot be solved at an individual level. To meaningfully address homelessness in California, we must first confront our unsustainable reality of a massive housing shortage, unlivable wages, and the systemic racism that disproportionately levies the consequences of these inequities on Black, Indigenous, and people of color. This brief aims to illuminate the impact of structural and systematic forces on housing insecurity and homelessness by correcting the most common myths about homelessness in California. With this knowledge, we can collectively work toward sustainable policy solutions to bring a permanent end to homelessness in the state.

## SEPARATING MYTHS FROM THE FACTS

### MYTH



*"Most people experiencing homelessness in the state are not from California — people come here for our warm weather, lax policies, and homelessness services."*



### FACT



**90%** of California's unhoused residents fell into homelessness within the state, and **75%** live in the same county where they lost their housing. Additionally, **66%** of the people experiencing homelessness in California were born in the state.<sup>9</sup>

There is **no correlation** between temperature or generosity of welfare programs and rates of homelessness. There is a relationship between **unsheltered** homelessness and weather, since sub-freezing temperatures force certain governments to bring people indoors, but there is **no evidence** that warm weather or Democratic leadership attracts people experiencing homelessness to a region.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Herring, Yarbrough, & Alatorre 2020

<sup>9</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023

<sup>10</sup> Colburn & Aldern 2022

## MYTH

✘ “Homelessness is caused by drug addiction and mental illness.”



✘ “People experiencing homelessness are violent.”



## FACT

✔ The main causes of homelessness are **low wages, lack of affordable housing, and systemic racism.**<sup>11</sup>

When the average family is **cost-burdened**, meaning the cost of housing exceeds 30% of the household income,<sup>12</sup> rates of homelessness drastically increase.<sup>13</sup> The most common reason for someone with a lease to fall into homelessness is the sudden loss or reduction of income.<sup>14</sup>

There is **no correlation** between a state’s rate of mental illness or drug use and homelessness.<sup>15</sup> People’s memorable experiences with visible homelessness often include mental illness or drug use, which reinforces this misbelief, but rates of homelessness are actually higher in areas with low rates of serious mental illness.<sup>16</sup> Further, 70% of people experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles **do not** report substance use disorder.<sup>17</sup>

✔ People experiencing homelessness are much more commonly the **victims of violent crimes** than the perpetrators,<sup>18</sup> and they are significantly **more likely to experience physical and sexual violence** than their housed neighbors.<sup>19</sup> More than a third of unhoused Californians have been victimized by physical or sexual violence during their current episode of homelessness.<sup>20</sup>

In Los Angeles, despite making up only 1% of the city’s population,<sup>21</sup> **people experiencing homelessness accounted for 24% (92 of 382) of the homicide victims in 2022,<sup>22</sup> and 17% (56 of 327) of the homicide victims in 2023.<sup>23</sup>**

**7%** of people experiencing homelessness in California, predominantly women, fell into homelessness when **fleeing domestic violence.**<sup>24</sup> Nearly all unhoused survivors of intimate partner violence (95%) cited the high cost of housing as a barrier to regaining housing,<sup>25</sup> and 61% reported poor credit or eviction history — common consequences of domestic violence — as a barrier to exiting homelessness.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>11</sup> LAO 2023, Kushel & Moore 2023, CSH 2022, Colburn & Aldern 2022, California Budget & Policy Center March 2023, LAHSA 2023, Edwards 2021

<sup>12</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023

<sup>13</sup> CSH 2022

<sup>14</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023

<sup>15</sup> Colburn & Aldern 2022

<sup>16</sup> Colburn & Aldern 2022

<sup>17</sup> LAHSA 2023

<sup>18</sup> Berg 2022

<sup>19</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023

<sup>20</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023

<sup>21</sup> United States Census Bureau n.d., Kushel & Moore 2023

<sup>22</sup> Moore 2023


<sup>23</sup> Moore 2024

<sup>24</sup> LAHSA 2022

<sup>25</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023

<sup>26</sup> Hargrave, et al. 2024

## MYTH


 “We need more police to deal with homelessness.”




 “People fall into homelessness because they don’t want to work”



## FACT

 Anti-homeless ordinances, including citations, move-along orders, and the destruction of property, perpetuate chronic homelessness by acting as **additional barriers to housing, employment, and services**. This penalty of poverty deepens socioeconomic and health inequity, and it negatively impacts the safety and well-being of unhoused individuals, but **it does not reduce homelessness**.<sup>27</sup>

People experiencing homelessness already receive a disproportionate amount of contact with the police. 19% of unhoused folks entered homelessness from an institution such as prison or extended jail stays, and 30% spent time in jail during their current episode of homelessness.<sup>28</sup>

 Rates of homelessness are **lower** in regions with high rates of unemployment.<sup>29</sup>

15% of unhoused Californians report income from jobs, and 55% of those younger than 62 and without a disability are actively looking for employment.<sup>30</sup>

**45% of people that access homeless services report having a disability**,<sup>31</sup> and 24% of this group cannot find housing that meets their needs due to a physical disability.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Herring, Yarbrough, & Alatorre 2020

<sup>28</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023


<sup>29</sup> Colburn & Aldern 2022

<sup>30</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023


<sup>31</sup> CSH 2022

<sup>32</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023

## MYTH


 “Homeless camps and shelters lead to crime”



 “Providing housing to people experiencing homelessness is a waste of money. They don’t even want housing.”




## FACT

 There is **no significant correlation** between changes in visible homelessness (tents and makeshift structures) and changes in property crime. Rather, there is a strong correlation between property crime and complaints to the city about homelessness.<sup>33</sup>

**Housing first** models in which people experiencing homelessness are provided with housing and services (such as addiction and mental health services) have consistently proven to be the most effective method for alleviating homelessness.<sup>34</sup> Without increasing reliance on social services, **supportive housing programs reduce crime, increase employment, and improve health in surrounding areas.**<sup>35</sup>

**Encampment sweeps** increase the risk of sexual assault for women experiencing homelessness, as they are forced to relocate somewhere that is less safe and less familiar.<sup>36</sup> These sweeps are also correlated with increased rates of substance-related morbidity and mortality among people experiencing homelessness.<sup>37</sup>

 Permanent supportive housing, which is housing coupled with support services, is the most cost effective method to alleviate homelessness. Due to frequent use of emergency services, hospitalizations, and police interactions by people experiencing homelessness,<sup>38</sup> the cost to taxpayers of each person experiencing chronic homelessness is reduced by half when individuals experiencing chronic homelessness are housed.<sup>39</sup>

Nearly all people experiencing homelessness express interest in securing housing, but cite unaffordable housing costs, discrimination, lack of documentation, poor credit, and physical or behavioral health conditions as barriers to obtaining housing.<sup>40</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Lanfear et. al. 2022

<sup>35</sup> Cohen 2021

<sup>38</sup> CSH 2022

<sup>34</sup> Raven, Nieszwiecki, Kushel 2020, Colburn & Aldern 2022

<sup>36</sup> Herring et. al. 2020

<sup>39</sup> National Alliance to End Homelessness 2017

<sup>37</sup> Barocas 2023

<sup>40</sup> Kushel & Moore 2023

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