

HOMELESSNESS

REPORTING GUIDE



Prepared By :

The Homelessness Beat
Reporters Collective

TABLE OF CONTENTS

About This Document	3
Core Principles	4
Sources	6
Ground Rules	8
Ethics	10
Homeless or Unhoused?	11
Self-Care for Journalists	11
Data	12

About This Document

This information was compiled by reporters with years of experience reporting on homelessness. It is based on our conversations with hundreds of sources experiencing homelessness. But if people experiencing homelessness you report on and speak to have other preferences, listen to those. They are the ones directly impacted by your reporting. And let us know if you have suggested updates at homelessnessreporting@gmail.com.

Contributors

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Annemarie Cuccia is the editor-in-chief of Street Sense Media, a street paper reporting on homelessness in Washington, D.C., and sold by people experiencing homelessness. She's previously reported on homelessness for Street Sense, and is originally from Oklahoma.

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Will James, a Seattle-based journalist, created or co-created the audio documentaries Lost Patients, The Walk Home, and Outsiders, which explore homelessness, mental illness, substance use, and policing.

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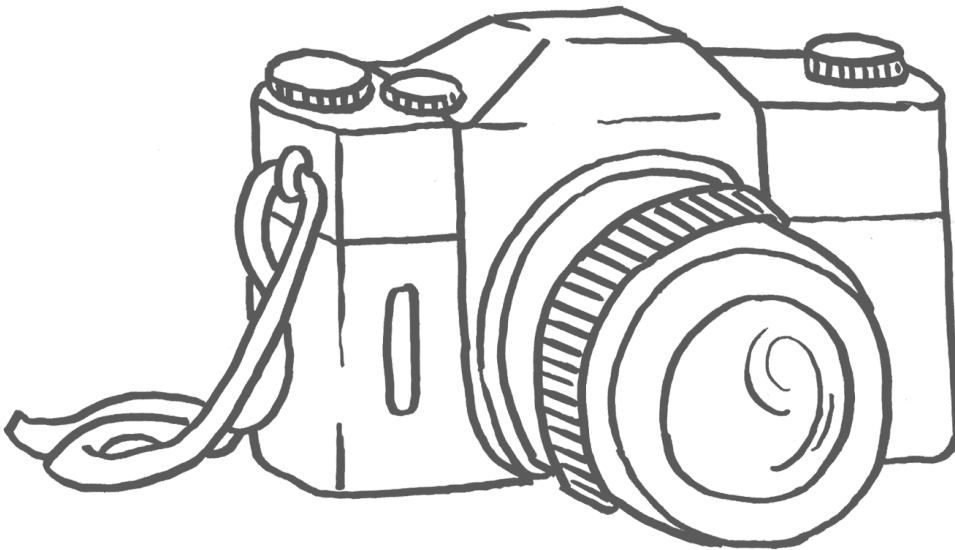
Core Principles

Good journalism centers the voices and perspectives of people in the communities you're covering. Homeless and formerly homeless sources add crucial context and insights to your reporting.

- **Your readers may have prejudices or misconceptions about homelessness.** Including the voices of those with real experience can help dispel and clarify biases, as long as it is done intentionally.
 - **The word "homeless" is imprecise and encompasses a vast range of experiences.** Some of the most visible and politicized people without homes are chronically homeless and live with disabling mental illness and substance use. But many others work one or more jobs and stay in less visible settings: shelters, vehicles, or with friends or family, "couch surfing." While reporting, be aware that you're probably capturing just one facet of homelessness, not the whole picture, and make sure your audience knows that, too.
 - **Make sure personal anecdotes and quotes are integral to the specific story you're telling, not generic filler about homelessness.** Anecdotes should ideally speak to broader trends.
 - **Include details that speak to a person's humanity.** This could include mentioning how someone has decorated their camp, how they support their biological or street family, and their likes, needs and desires.
- **Work closely with homeless sources and the people who serve them to make sure your coverage is accurate, fair and respectful.**
 - This could mean reading back quotes to your sources to ensure you got them right, explaining how an anecdote they shared might fit into your story, or letting them know you'll be talking to them again before you publish.
 - **Keep in mind how a story about this person's life, location or status could impact them.**
- **Context matters.**
 - **Understand and explain how systemic issues may be affecting the person's experience.** Someone's struggle to access housing could be linked to an affordable housing shortage.
 - **Lean into the complexity.** Someone doesn't have to be "perfect" to be a sympathetic subject who can help tell an important story.
 - Homeless sources are not a political monolith. **Do not assume that advocates or service providers — or their politics — speak for homeless sources.**
 - It can be helpful to reference systemic problems and trauma, like incarceration or domestic violence, in explaining how someone became homeless.

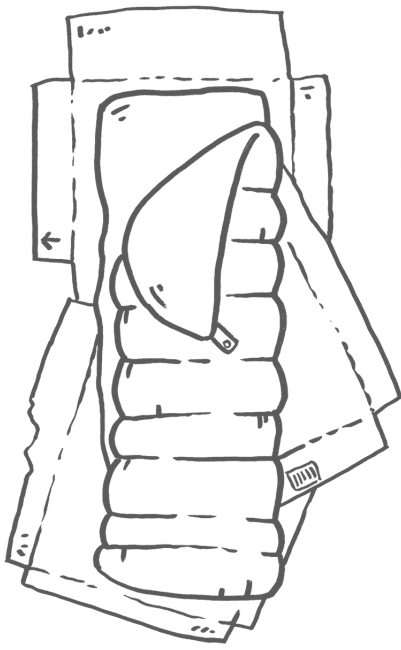
Core Principles

- **Be mindful of the politically and emotionally charged nature of homelessness and your role in helping readers navigate this complex topic.**
 - Recognize audiences are primed to focus on visible substance use and mental illness and to discount less visible systemic realities contributing to homelessness, such as a lack of low-income housing options. When reporting on mental health or addiction, add context to offer a full picture.
 - **Evaluate your sources.** When deciding whether to quote advocates or others, consider what experiences undergird their opinions. Do they have experience working directly with people on the streets or in shelters? Do their descriptions match your reporting?
- **Don't ignore solutions.**
 - Coverage about what's working to resolve homelessness can be just as important as stories identifying what's exacerbating the problem. Whenever possible, highlight resiliency and efforts to create change rather than portraying some as simply a victim. ***Directly ask homeless sources about solutions they think should be pursued.***
- ***Be creative with storytelling methods such as as-told-to or first-person narratives.***



How to Get and Keep Homeless Sources

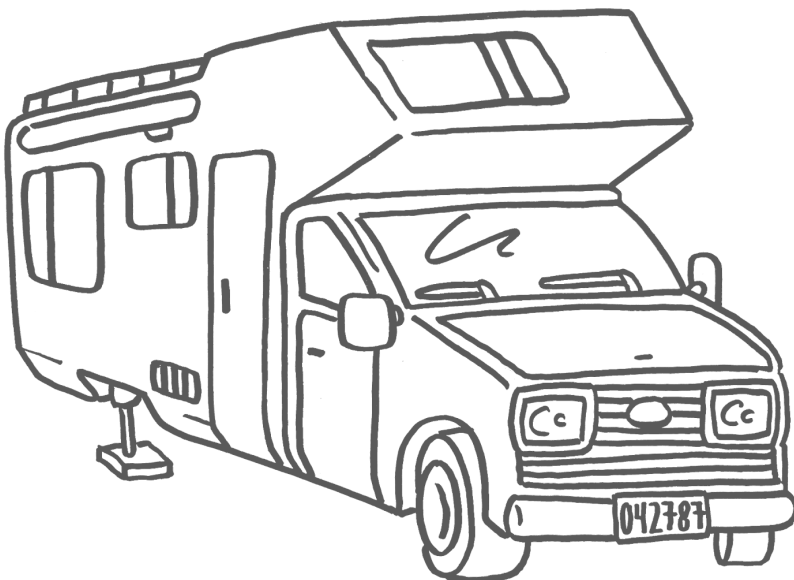
- **Ask service providers and advocates to introduce you to people.** If it makes your source more comfortable, consider asking the intermediary to be part of the interview.



- **Be sensitive to how your approach, presence, questions, and the time spent with you can impact a homeless source.** For example, an interview during a sweep could lead to them losing belongings. They may also be skipping a chance at a job or a meal to talk to you.
 - **Even if someone doesn't have a house with a locking door, their tent and encampment are their home.** Be respectful of that, and avoid barging into a tent, tarp shelter or the immediate vicinity of their camp without announcing yourself. Announce yourself verbally rather than tapping or knocking on a tent or tarp.
 - **Keep in mind it can be difficult to stay in touch with sources living on the street, as they often lose access to phones or can't find anywhere to charge them.** Encampment sweeps can prevent you from finding people in the same place day to day.
 - **Approach homeless people as you would other sources – with an open mind, with caution and a learning mindset, and setting aside any biases.** While you may encounter someone using drugs or experiencing mental illness, many homeless people do not. People with addictions or mental illnesses should not automatically be ruled out for interviews or background conversations, as long as they can consent.
 - **Do not take photos or videos without consent.**
 - **Share your intent, a concise summary of the story you're working on and why you want to interview someone before starting an interview.**
 - **Don't make promises about the result your story could get for them or say you'll do something and fail to deliver.** Experiencing homelessness often means lots of broken promises.
- **If possible, send sources a link to or a hard copy of the story when it's published.**

How to Get and Keep Homeless Sources

- **Bring business cards and hand them out.** Suggest that sources take a photo of the card in case it gets lost or stolen. **Get their phone number and email address if they have one.** Also, exchange information about social media platforms you use for work. It's helpful to tell sources that it's important to stay in touch to check facts or follow up.
- **Stay safe.**
 - Be cautious when visiting unfamiliar encampments alone, especially camps hidden far from the public eye. **If you feel uncomfortable, consider going with a photographer, another reporter or an advocate or outreach worker.**
 - **When reporting in the field, dress plainly and wear closed-toed shoes without heels.** Avoid carrying a computer bag or technology. Simply using a notepad and a phone will make you less of a target for theft or suspicion.
- **If they are comfortable with it, take a photo of your source and explain it helps you keep track of people you meet.** This photo is a resource to show others if you're searching for them later. Also take photos of things like street signs or graffiti tags to keep track of where you spoke to them.
- **Ask the source if there are regular hangouts where you might find them or friends who could connect the two of you.**



Ground Rules

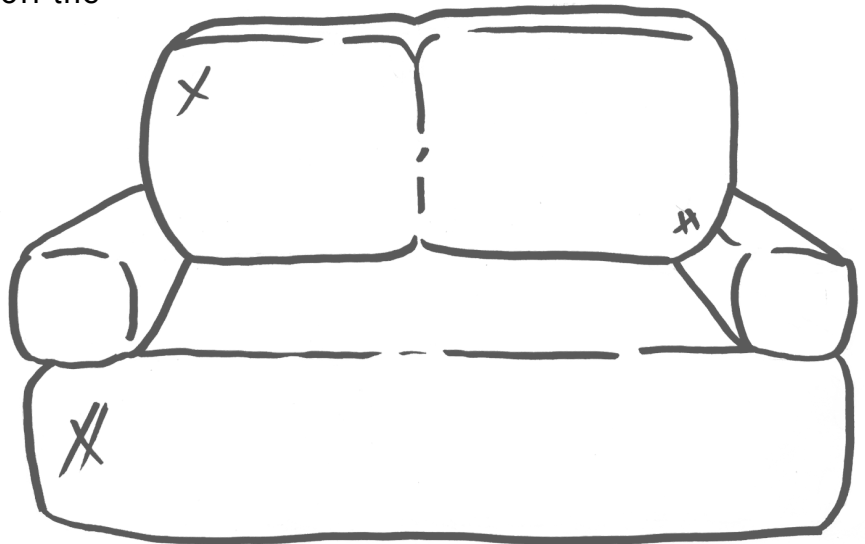
- **Don't ask for a source's name and assume they know that means they will be quoted.**

Specifically ask if they are OK with you quoting them and using their name. Double-check this at the end of the interview.

- If they express concern about being quoted by name, offer options allowed by your publication, such as being quoted anonymously, only using a first name, using a street name or using initials. Give them the option to stay out of the story altogether.
- **Understand there may be legitimate reasons someone doesn't want their full name included in your story.** A survivor of domestic violence may worry about their safety, or a person whose employer does not know they are homeless may fear losing their job.
- **Listen for cues your source is telling you something they don't want included – such as “between us,” “just so you understand,” or “so you know” – and follow up.** It won't always sound like a request to be off the record.

- **Avoid retraumatization at all costs.**

- Ask for high-level details about painful experiences. There is not always a need to dig further. After a difficult or intense interview, do not leave the person lost in the past.
- **Consider spending extra time talking with the source and re-focusing their attention on the present.** Consider asking about what they're doing the rest of the day, what brings them relief or joy, or about their pet.



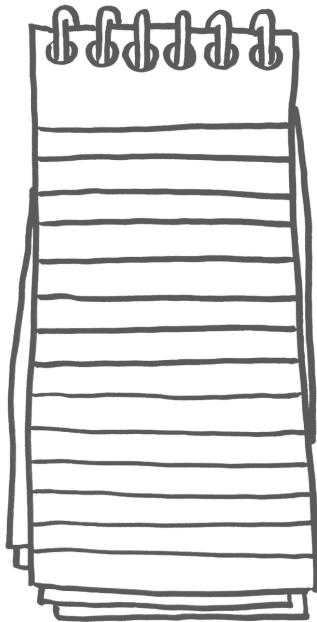
Ground Rules

- **Be upfront about how much of a source's interview you are likely to end up using in your story.**
 - Interviews about homelessness can be difficult and emotionally draining for the subject, and it can be a major disappointment to them if you only use one quote. Be honest about how much material you can use – or if you may not end up using it at all.
 - **Consider explaining:** *"Even if I don't quote you in this story, or use just a short quote, just talking to you has helped me understand this issue more."*
- **Make sure your source knows the interview is entirely optional.**
 - This is especially important if a service provider has connected you with someone who is benefiting from one of their programs.
- **Explain to sources that you appreciate them sharing sensitive information and personal details, and that it could help shift the national and local conversation and policy on homelessness, housing, and health care.**



Ethics on the Beat

- **Should you buy food for a source?**
 - Many news organizations allow reporters to buy food or drinks for certain sources. If so, these policies should apply to homeless sources as well. Reporters should also be mindful of power dynamics between themselves and people who may be dehydrated or malnourished.
 - **A source should never feel compelled to participate in a story or consider a meal payment for their assistance.**
- **You may witness or become aware of serious, urgent physical or behavioral health issues.** You should be prepared to call 911 if someone's health seems so precarious that their life is at stake.
- **Be careful about sharing details in your stories that could do harm.**
 - For example, don't mention the specific location of an encampment if it could lead to the person being targeted for enforcement or violence.
- **Be mindful about which photographs you publish with a story about homelessness, and try to get photos specific to each story.**
 - It can be offensive to your sources to publish a generic photo of a sprawling, unsanitary tent encampment with a story about an unrelated homeless individual.
- **The right details can make a reader "see" a person and what they've lived through.**
 - Ensure the details of someone's appearance or living conditions serve a purpose in your story and **do not reinforce stereotypes or contribute to dehumanization.**
 - For instance, writing about the state of someone's teeth, if it's not directly relevant to the story, can embarrass them without adding anything meaningful to the story.



Homeless or Unhoused?

- Use the term your readers are most likely to understand and ask sources what they prefer.
- Avoid dehumanizing or unnecessarily sensationalized language such as “addicts,” “hobos,” “vagrants,” “transients,” etc. Use **person-centered language**.
 - For example, “homeless Californians,” or “unhoused residents,” not “the homeless.”
 - **Use specific, “people-first” language** such as “people living in encampments in Seattle.”

Self-Care for Journalists

- **Remind your newsroom about your exposure to trauma and ask for flexibility, whether that means working from home after visiting encampments or working on lighter stories between intense ones.**
- **Connect with other journalists who cover homelessness to discuss stories and common challenges.**
- **Consider therapy or counseling to provide a space to share your feelings and observations.**
- **Establish boundaries and keep them.**
 - You might set up a Google Voice number to share with sources so you know when a work contact is getting in touch or silence notifications at a certain time each day so you can wind down. **Be transparent about when you are and aren’t available.**

Where to Find Data

- **U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development**
- **Regional Continuums of Care:** These groups typically oversee both point-in-time (PIT) annual censuses tracked by HUD and Homeless Management Information System databases tracking people interacting with the service system.
 - More CoCs are starting to publicly report year-round homelessness data that is more informative and revealing than PIT data, which are estimates that experts generally agree undercount the population. PIT procedures also often vary year to year and by jurisdiction, which can complicate data comparisons.
- **Advocacy organizations** such as the National Alliance to End Homelessness, which publish federal and state fact sheets
- **Local, state law enforcement agencies and code enforcement departments**, which often track citations, homeless camps, public complaints on encampments or other quality-of-life issues.

For California:

- UC San Francisco Benioff Housing and Homelessness Initiative, for statewide facts in California:
- California Health Care Foundation health and homelessness portal
- California state website with county-by-county data on homelessness, housing and behavioral health
- California Interagency Council on Homelessness data website featuring data from the state's continuum of care councils