



Homelessness, Not Hopelessness

Roughly 640,000 people are homeless in the United States on any given night. Over the course of a year, that number swells to between 1.5 and 2 million. In New York City, and in other urban metropolises, we see homelessness every day. How do you react? How does your reaction affect which policies will be explored?



THE ISSUE:

Public perceptions of homelessness range from sympathy to outright aggression, sometimes in the same place. It's not uncommon to hear people express a desire to help alongside parallel concerns over "moral hazards" and "freeloaders."

Is homelessness solvable? What if data suggesting a housing-first approach defies what we see with our own eyes - people struggling to get by? Dealing with homelessness requires us to view the issue as a solvable problem, one that allows our government to make investments that make sense to treat homelessness at a deeper level.

WHY IS YOUR STORY IMPORTANT?

If you respond to homelessness with pity, you treat the short term. If you're able to see a homeless person as a person, you're better able to see how some of the more holistic solutions being proposed make sense. How can we help people make this shift in their perceptions of homelessness?

NOMINATED BY:

TBC



The Issue

Background

Roughly 640,000 people are homeless in the United States on any given night. Over the course of a year, that number grows to 1.5- 2 million. For most, homelessness is a short-term crisis, but for a small subset of roughly 100,000 people, it becomes a chronic condition. These individuals and some families have extremely complex and social needs that prolong their homelessness and make them highly dependent on costly government services that typically fail to deliver lasting or cost effective results. They are also at higher risk of death on the streets than those who suffer from many forms of cancer.

Story-Crafters - if anyone has time to do research,

- Can we breakdown why people are homeless?
- Any data on people moving into and out of homelessness?
- Is homelessness actually more temporary and transitory than fall back?

How has this issue played out in the public?

People's exposure to homelessness are those they see in the streets. Often, judgments are made when people see homeless individuals panhandling or sleeping on the streets as to any substance abuse issues they may have, the reason they are homeless and their employment situation.

But not many people see the path that they went down to get to that place. Sometimes a feeling of blame exists rather than understanding that sometimes people end up in vulnerable situations. Challenging this feeling of blame rather than understanding would be part of the attitude shift we'd like.

Public perceptions of homelessness range from sympathy to outright aggression, sometimes in the same place. It's not uncommon to hear people express a desire to help alongside parallel concerns over "moral hazards" and "freeloaders." Our national data reveals that for most people experiencing homelessness, the story is rarely simple. By understanding that it is rarely someone's fault when they are homeless and that is a situation that almost nobody wants to be in (even if some people say they want to be homeless), we can change the reality of the way



we approach and look at the issue. It is crucial for the public to understand that chronic homelessness is preventable by addressing the causes, and once people are on the street it is not that they are lazy or "haven't helped themselves." It may be that they are simply in a vulnerable situation - a situation that could be paralleled in others' lives, but without the consequences. And once someone is in that situation, it is easy to get stuck in an ongoing cycle of systems that include shelter use, jail time and ER visits.

Changing people's minds to see the humanity behind the faces of people who live on the streets is the largest public battleground around homelessness, as is the recognition that the people we see on the streets are only a fraction - and the most vulnerable fraction - of those who are homeless.

The other common battleground is the question of whether or not homelessness is actually a solvable problem.

It would be great if the public could think of it as a systemic problem like not having proper sanitation in hospitals. When that happens, disease is likely to spread and the mortality rate is higher, but that can be prevented by implementing sanitation systems that prevent infections from spreading. And no one blames the people who got an infection as a result of a faulty sanitation system. Similarly, homelessness is a result of not having a proper system in place to address it, but it is one of the few products of a flawed system that results in the general public blaming the people experiencing it.

Putting a face and a name to homeless individuals and seeing them as the result of a flawed system rather than people not taking responsibility for their own welfare, there would create a huge attitude shift toward homelessness. Similarly, being able to take a step back from the result of homelessness - generally the image of someone sleeping on the street or in a shelter - and understand that it doesn't happen overnight, and a lot of different factors contributed to that situation, will hopefully allow people to see homeless individuals as victims in their communities, not problems.

What are you advocating for?

We believe that the solution involves addressing factors that lead to homelessness such as employment support, mental health support and eviction prevention services, we are creating a larger system that safeguards individuals from becoming homeless. And if they do become homeless, we are creating a situation in which the resources exist for people and their personal networks to be problem solvers for themselves, their neighbors and their communities.



Goals

Shift public perception, as indicated above, about seeing the humanity in someone who's homeless, rather than seeing them as a problem. More precisely, we think it would be good to:

- Build a widespread narrative that ending homelessness IS possible
- Shift attitudes away from band-aid solutions like shelters toward permanent housing and helping individuals and families avoid homelessness in the first place
- Change people's perspectives around the reason why people are homeless and educate them so they can see homeless individuals as victims worthy of help who are a result of a flawed system rather than failures who are problematic for their communities

Specific Ideas/Hooks/Concepts

- A visualization of the costs associated with homelessness vs. permanent housing, highlighting that housing is cheaper (Many studies available, including several on the website of the National Alliance to End Homelessness)
- A portrayal explaining how people end up homeless. Instead of seeing the end product - someone on the street - it would be great to somehow illustrate the factors over time that lead to that and the cycles and systems people can get stuck in when they are homeless that make it nearly impossible to escape that situation on their own.
- To generate empathy - what about apartment searching if your income is 20K (we all hate looking for apartments)
- Here are examples of past initiatives - what's good and bad about them?
- http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/images/posters/kids_poster.pdf

Facts You Can Play With

- Many different figures exist (all net positive), but on average, it is roughly 30% cheaper to permanently house a chronically homeless individual than to let them remain homeless



- According to the NYC Department of Homeless Services, nearly 12,126 families were spending the night in a shelter each night - the number has increased 18 percent over the past year.
- According to a 2013 study published by ABT Associates on NYC's HomeBase program, NYC saves 25% per family by helping families stave off shelter stays through short-term rental subsidies than by allowing them to fall into the shelter system
- Here are factsheets and databases from the National Coalition on Homelessness
- <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/index.html>
- Homelessness and poverty are inextricably linked. Poor people are frequently unable to pay for housing, food, childcare, health care, and education. Difficult choices must be made when limited resources cover only some of these necessities. Often it is housing, which absorbs a high proportion of income that must be dropped. If you are poor, you are essentially an illness, an accident, or a paycheck away from living on the streets.
- Domestic Violence: Battered women who live in poverty are often forced to choose between abusive relationships and homelessness. In addition, 50% of the cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). Approximately 63% of homeless women have experienced domestic violence in their adult lives (Network to End Domestic Violence).
- Mental Illness: Approximately 16% of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of severe and persistent mental illness (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). Despite the disproportionate number of severely mentally ill people among the homeless population, increases in homelessness are not attributable to the release of severely mentally ill people from institutions. Most patients were released from mental hospitals in the 1950s and 1960s, yet vast increases in homelessness did not occur until the 1980s, when incomes and housing options for those living on the margins began to diminish rapidly. According to the 2003 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Report, most homeless persons with mental illness do not need to be institutionalized, but can live in the community with the appropriate supportive housing options (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). However, many mentally ill homeless people are unable to obtain access to supportive housing and/or other treatment services. The mental health support services most needed include case management, housing, and treatment.