

Problems Facing the Unhoused

By Joni Halpern



Among persons who are struggling for enough money to live on, there is a one-way relationship between income and housing. Unless some miraculous fortune intervenes, the low-income housing seeker will always be chasing housing that is less and less affordable.

On the income side of the relationship, many forces are at work to sabotage even the hardest workers' attempts to increase income: stagnant wages, income volatility, income inequality, and a job market driven by algorithms that prioritize financial efficiency over fixed hours, permanent jobs and opportunities for advancement among proficient workers. Among those who are less able to compete in the job market, such as those encumbered by disability, illness, unmarketable skills, or other impediments, there is no possibility of narrowing the distance between their resources and the fading arrow of affordable housing.

On the housing side of the relationship, we are faced with an inadequate housing supply for all but those with the highest levels of income. As with all desirable things in short supply, this has driven up the price of ownership and rentals. But even if housing construction could be stepped up to provide for middle-income households, there would still be a considerable, and in many regions, a growing constituency of persons with limited income that cannot be increased, and in fact, is in constant danger of being lost entirely. These would include, among others, persons living on disability, pensions, Social Security for the aged, public benefits, or solely on food stamps.

The stock of housing has never been adequately funded by government or public-private partnerships, so the need continues to grow with no substantial abatement in sight. And the income support government once provided are being removed steadily. Consequently, the first problems facing the unhoused are lack of adequate income and lack of subsidized housing.



Everybody has to be somewhere. If not a home, then where?

First Steps: Betwixt and Between

The first thing people do when they know they are bound for homelessness is line up a cast of family or friends to provide as much shelter as possible for the upcoming ordeal. “Sofa-surfing” has become a common expression as homelessness has dug its grubby fingers into our public consciousness. However, maintaining an existing household, especially one with limited means, while carrying the burden of feeding and making space for another individual, couple, or family can only be a temporary fix. Therefore, in the initial stages of being unhoused, victims move from one place to the next, filling in the unsheltered portions of their journey with stopgap measures: sleeping in cars, parks, laundromats, next to city infrastructure such as bridges or buildings, or in encampments off the beaten path.

Next Steps: Shelter, But No Place to Call Home

Public shelters are a next stop, but the drawbacks are severe, especially for women, children, and persons with physical or mental disabilities. Shelters are places in which contagious diseases spread. In cold weather, it is common to enter a shelter and hear constant coughing among residents. Privacy is an issue, not just on the level of protecting personal belongings or bodily integrity, but because the sight lines of shelter life expose one in ways that destroy the barriers of modesty and self-protection with which women and children are often raised.



Public and nonprofit shelters quite often are not equipped to protect adequately the physically or mentally impaired, or the very young or very old, rendering these persons more easily taken advantage of by those with greater capacity. Surveillance and



security cannot protect against all harm that can occur when a vastly diverse body of people housed within inches or feet of each other interact along the rough surfaces of human survival. Many shelters also have rules that deny access to rest or hygiene facilities during certain periods of the day, resulting in destitute persons roaming outside without money, food or a place to rest, sometimes experiencing embarrassing and unhealthy incidents of immediate bodily need. Shelters are often

distant from jobs, schools, churches, clinics and other sources of help and support that constitute the “neighborhood” to which an individual or family once belonged. Shelters commonly cause disruption of families, requiring fathers, as well as sons of a certain age, to reside separately from female household members. Depending upon the funding sources, shelters may have insufficient beds to meet existing needs.

Transitions

Organized housing alternatives, such as private dorm-like rooms or other housing for families, veterans, foster youth, or other targeted portions of the unhoused population are welcome respite for the unhoused. The vast majority of the unhoused are not able to be accommodated in these alternatives, for in the face of existing need, they are underfunded, understaffed, or sufficient dwellings have not yet been constructed. Ideally, these types of temporary housing alternatives would feed a constant stream of persons through a filter of targeted assistance into permanent housing, some supported, some not. But the other part of the equation – the availability of subsidized housing – is still a problem.



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Last Stop: The Streets or Encampments

In the early years of the growing problem of homelessness, a well-known police chief used to go around giving talks to well-heeled civic club members in the suburbs.



“What do you make of this increasing homelessness?” the police chief’s audiences would ask.

“If you look closely at this population,” he would pontificate, “about 40% of them want to be there. They don’t like living like the rest of us, getting up every day, going to work, being told what to do. They like their freedom. So, they live on the streets. They get free food. They go to the emergency room when they need medical care. They sit in the library or in the park sleeping all day. They live the good life.”

This explanation begs the question: How did it happen that after 1980, a growing number of single adult males, then families, suddenly found this free-wheeling way of life so appealing that they gave up the roof over their heads to walk the streets with all their belongings, shivering in winter, sweating in summer, beset by insects and vermin, struggling for a decent meal or a place to relieve themselves, hiding from the harassment of authorities, all to escape the confinement of a lockable door and the privacy of closed curtains? The only possible answer is that homelessness has increased for reasons that have nothing to do with personal desire. When people cannot pay rent, they must look for other options. When family, friends, shelters, or temporary housing alternatives are not available, they turn to other means.



People live in encampments when other housing options fail. In those encampments, they contend with problems that housing, by its nature, either mitigates or alleviates. Housing can confine or even isolate sickness, cultural differences, emotional and mental health needs, relationship problems, irritating personal habits, financial struggles, and unevenness of resources. Housing can help protect against intruders. It can serve as a support for family life or as a bulwark of privacy for the individual. It is the outermost expression of the American cultural expectation of individual or familial stability, while the absence of housing is the most convincing portrayal of personal and familial failure.

People who live in encampments or on the streets are vulnerable to illness and injury. They are evicted, ticketed, charged with low-level crimes and suspected more easily than others when higher-level crimes occur in the urban vicinities in which they dwell. Many unhoused persons who are camp-dwellers or street dwellers accumulate hundreds of dollars in court costs and fees they can never pay but which ultimately relegate them to stints in local jails or negate their applications for housing once they become able to seek it.

Street and encampment dwellers often have no access to simple hygiene facilities like hand-washing stations, toilets or garbage bins, a result of public policy founded on the notion that “if you build it, they will come.” Even contagious disease thought to originate among the unhoused population has not convinced public officials to provide easily accessible public hygiene facilities to enable street and encampment dwellers to maintain minimal cleanliness that would enhance not only their health but that of the general public as well.



The unseen cost of street dwelling and encampment is the development of an emotional burden of self-perception and self-protection that may make housing harder to obtain when the opportunity arises. Advocates and others who have interacted with



street or encampment dwellers, and even passersby who have handed them a dollar often note the homeless have an expectation of not being touched – not with a handshake, not a light tap on the shoulder, nothing. The housed public recognizes the health risk of contamination from the unhoused. And within the enclave of street and encampment dwellers at large, there may be an

understanding that congenial convey a vulnerability to victimization by predators.

Perhaps it could be said that a mask covers the faces of many unhoused street or encampment dwellers. They may eat, sleep, and even relieve themselves in the broad public eye, but their suffering, humiliation, and sense of failure is private, hidden behind a veneer, perhaps even a veneer of false independence, a possible genesis of the police chief's notion that 40 per cent of the homeless prefer living on the streets.



Conclusion

The problems facing the unhoused that are listed in this summary are only a sampling. There are other difficulties such as having no mailing address; experiencing the repeated loss of vital records, identification, and personal items through authorized confiscation by authorities; theft of cash, bus passes or personal items; removal and loss of tents or protective structures by authorities, intermittent loss of phone service, and forced removal to places distant from service providers during police sweeps.

Homelessness is a recurring phenomenon among low-income persons. Individuals and families often experience homelessness several times over a period of months and even years. During each of these experiences, they lose belongings, vital records, relationships to providers of health care, education, services and other necessities of a stable life. Their families are disrupted, their children may be subject to removal by child protective agencies, and their tethers to extended family, neighborhoods, and community are broken.

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For more than 25 years, Joni Halpern has been a lawyer for low-income families and individuals. She began work as a Legal Aid lawyer representing parents on public assistance, then moved to the ACLU of San Diego as a staff attorney. Her work there focused on the poor, and it led to her founding (along with 12 women on welfare) a nonprofit known as Supportive Parents Information Network (SPIN). SPIN is a grassroots organization that brought together women and children who lived in deep poverty but wanted to learn everything possible about how to escape it.

Everyone was a volunteer at SPIN. Joni's job was to represent clients in administrative hearings, teach groups of parents about the law so they could advocate for welfare-to-work plans that offered some chance at self-sustaining employment, and arm parents with knowledge of their rights under the law so they would not be taken advantage of by landlords, predatory businesses, government aid agencies, nonprofits, and others. Working with parents and kids, she designed projects that brought attention to areas of the law and regulations that needed to be changed if poor people were to be given a chance to escape poverty.

For example, when a child in a welfare family received a scholarship for excellent work or in a competition, that money was counted as income for the family. The welfare grant was reduced dollar for dollar, and the scholarship was then forced to be used to pay rent or bills. SPIN initiated the challenge to that regulation and was central to enactment of a state law forbidding competitive scholarships from being counted as income to a welfare family. This was only one of many changes the group was able to bring about.

Joni's experience with low-income families and individuals is lengthy and deep. Changes in law and policy take years. You can't just start the discussion and walk away. One must be able to keep both grassroots families and public officials involved in order to achieve the distant goal. Grassroots support at every stage of the battle has to be robust and current.

After she retired from SPIN, Joni continued to represent low-income clients in administrative hearings and other proceedings involving Supplemental Security Income, In-Home Supportive Services, public assistance benefits, conservatorship, and housing matters. She has personally represented a few thousand clients, and has conducted workshops and client interviews with thousands in shelters, schools, churches, homes and at hospital bedsides. Joni has kept contact with many low-income families over the years, and knows their struggles with periodic homelessness and with problems obtaining assistance even when it is obvious that they are financially eligible.