ADDRESSING HOMELESSNESS IN PARKS: AN INCLUSIVE PRACTICES GUIDE

880cities

Studio 364 - 401 Richmond St. W, Toronto O.N. M5V 3A8, Canada

Website: 880Cities.org   Email: info@880cities.org
Facebook: /880CitiesOrg   Twitter: @880Cities
Free Newsletter: https://www.880cities.org/subscribe/

8 80 Cities is a non-profit organization based in Toronto, Canada that is dedicated to contributing to the transformation of cities into places where people can walk, bike, access public transit and visit vibrant parks and public places. The 8 80 Cities approach is to engage people and communities across multiple sectors to inspire the creation of cities that are easily accessible, safe and enjoyable for all.

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601 E. Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20049, United States

Websites: AARP.org and AARP.org/Livable   Email: Livable@AARP.org
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AARP is the United States' largest nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to empowering people 50 or older to choose how they live as they age. With nearly 38 million members and offices in every state, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands, AARP strengthens communities and advocates for what matters most to families, with a focus on health security, financial stability and personal fulfillment. The AARP Livable Communities initiatives programs include the AARP Network of Age-Friendly States and Communities and the annual AARP Community Challenge "quick-action" grant program.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As of 2019, the United States had over half a million people who were without a home on any given night, and **older adults aged 55+ quickly became the fastest-growing group to experience homelessness.** The aged homeless population is growing rapidly and is projected to continue growing for the next decade.[1]

While the national homelessness crisis existed well before COVID-19, the pandemic has exacerbated this rising challenge. With access to safe shelters and social supports facing increasing demands and pressures, people experiencing homelessness are turning ever more to parks and public spaces for refuge.

In 2018, 8 80 Cities partnered with AARP and The Trust for Public Land to publish *Creating Parks and Public Places for People of All Ages*. Since the release of that publication, individuals and organizations involved in programming, managing, and designing parks have sought more specific guidance on better solutions for unhoused people living in parks and public spaces.

This document equips readers with vocabulary, evidence, and promising practices that can support their efforts to develop more inclusive approaches to homelessness in parks, for the ultimate benefit of public space for all users.

The policy and good practice recommendations below are informed by interviews with subject matter experts, park managers, frontline service providers, and researchers. We've also highlighted findings and statistics from academic literature, government reports, and publications from nonprofit organizations that focus on housing policy, serve the homeless population, and/or focus on eradicating homelessness.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following issues and recommended responses are outlined in the document:

1 **Issue:** Misconceptions, Stigma, and Bias
   Response: Reframe on Human Rights, Educate, and Train

2 **Issue:** Criminalization and Forced Removal
   Response: Trauma-Informed Approaches and Coordinated Social Supports
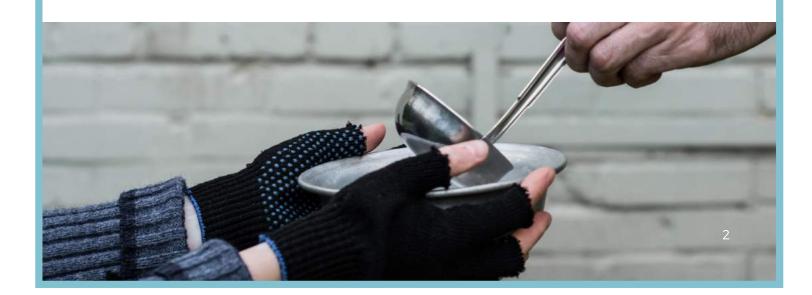
3 **Issue:** Traditional Parks Planning and Consultation Is Exclusionary
   Response: Inclusive Engagement, Activities, and Programming

4 **Issue:** Hostile Architecture and Design
   Response: Design for Dignity

5 **Issue:** Siloed, Disconnected, and Underfunded Services and Supports
   Response: Integrated and Coordinated Responses, Partnerships and Investment

6 **Issue:** A Legacy of Discriminatory and Unjust Policies
   Response: Evaluate and Reform Policies with an Equity Lens

City leaders must look at ways to support social and economic recovery from the pandemic, and parks and public spaces will play a critical role. **The time to act is now.**

INTRODUCTION

The rate of unsheltered homelessness has been trending upward since 2016, well before the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic only worsened the homelessness crisis. One way was by adding new challenges for people experiencing homelessness. Access to shelters, respite centers, public washrooms, and places to warm up all but ended during the initial phases of the pandemic. Parks and public spaces thus played an increasingly important role for those lacking not only shelter but access to social services.

17 OF 10,000
AMERICANS EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS ON ANY GIVEN NIGHT*

55+

32% INCREASE
OF OLDER ADULTS WILL EXPERIENCE HOMELESSNESS FROM 2017-2026*

PROJECTION OF HOMELESS SENIORS BY CITY:

NEW YORK   BOSTON   L.A. COUNTY

165% ↗   **174%** ↗   **196%** ↗

2017-2030*   2017-2030*   2017-2030*

*Statistics reflect U.S. homeless rates prior to the COVID-19 pandemic
(National Alliance for Ending Homelessness, 2020; Culhane, et. al., 2019)

INTRODUCTION

The retreat to parks and public spaces by people experiencing homelessness is a symptom of deep-rooted inequities and policy failures that must be addressed.

The root causes of homelessness include: [2]

Low Wages and Precarious Employment

Lack of Affordable Housing

Lack of Affordable Healthcare

Domestic Violence

Mental Health

Many cities have committed to ending chronic homelessness by investing in safe, affordable, and supportive housing for all residents along with well-resourced supports and social services.
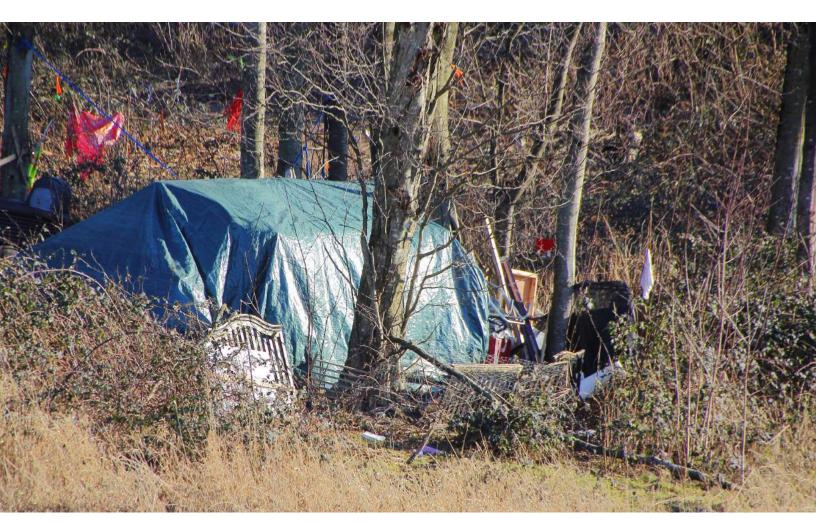
While investing in great parks and public spaces cannot solve chronic homelessness, there are important approaches advocates, planners, parks managers and policymakers can take to better address the issue of homelessness in parks.

We do not have to accept that homelessness is an inevitable aspect of modern society. This document highlights some promising approaches to this growing challenge.
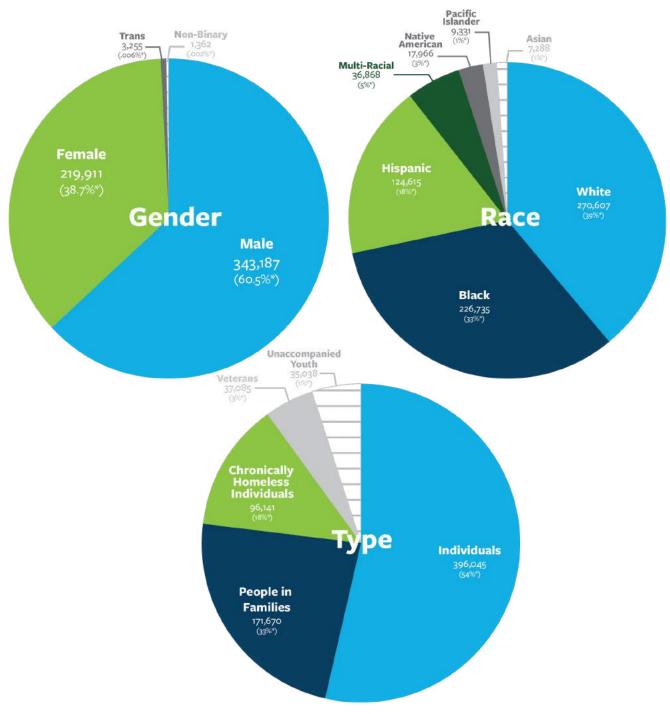
WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?

Homelessness can be both visible and invisible. It is not limited to the occupation of a park or public space via a tent and sleeping bag but can also refer to nomadic campers in RVs and trailers, those chronic couch surfers, or those taking up residence in shelters or utilizing other overnight support services.

Homelessness is also not just an urban or park-specific issue. It spans the urban, suburban, and rural divide.

Homelessness can be found among people of all ages, genders, racial backgrounds. The struggles associated with homelessness can be compounded for folks of intersecting identities where, for whom racism, sexism, and ableism can multiply the difficulties of accessing social services. Women; gender diverse folks, Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC); and older adults all experience homelessness in different ways and face a range of barriers in accessing support.

The following graphs display key demographics and types of homelessness across the United States. These graphs include observed rural homelessness, but hidden homelessness and couch surfing are not captured by the data nor by traditional census estimations.

Gender
Trans 3,255 (.006%*)
Non-Binary 1,362 (.002%*)
Female 219,911 (38.7%*)
Male 343,187 (60.5%*)

Race
Pacific Islander 9,331 (1%*)
Native American 17,966 (3%*)
Multi-Racial 36,868 (5%*)
Asian 7,288 (1%*)
Hispanic 124,615 (18%*)
White 270,607 (39%*)
Black 226,735 (33%*)

Type
Unaccompanied Youth 35,038 (1%*)
Veterans 37,085 (3%*)
Chronically Homeless Individuals 96,141 (18%*)
Individuals 396,045 (54%*)
People in Families 171,670 (33%*)

*Based on Total Population of People Experiencing Homelessness (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2020)

THINKING OF THE FUTURE

Addressing homelessness in parks begins with understanding what perpetuates homelessness in our parks and public spaces, policies, and societal attitudes.

The section below introduces key issues, concrete actions, and case studies from cities across North America.

It highlights promising approaches to parks management that acknowledge the unique and multifaceted challenges faced by those experiencing homelessness. It offers solutions that can create more inclusive parks and public spaces and more equitable communities overall.

Stigma and bias are intrinsically linked to the ways in which people experiencing homelessness are portrayed and mistreated in policy. The predominant yet misleading narrative about homelessness is that it is a product of poor life choices, made solely by the individuals themselves. It is often clouded with stigma and bias about substance use, mental illness, and poverty. However, homelessness is not an individual problem, but one rooted in policy failures and systemic injustices.

Misconceptions of people who experience homelessness have informed policy and service provisioning. Failing to acknowledge the root causes of homelessness —job instability, the lack of affordable housing, discriminatory policies, domestic violence— can focus efforts and investment on the wrong strategy. For example, when plans focus on counseling, job training, and drug and alcohol treatment without providing supportive housing, they do not result in measurable outcome; they waste important, finite resources. Housing and access to services must go hand in hand in order to move people out of homelessness.[3]

To challenge implicit and explicit biases, park management guides must acknowledge that language matters. People-first language puts human beings before labels or diagnoses. By saying someone is experiencing homelessness and not simply that he or she is homeless, you are describing something that person is going through rather than defining the person by their situation.

People experiencing homelessness are human beings with diverse experiences and motivations. They may want to spend time in parks for various reasons, including:

- To enjoy the space like anyone else.

- Shelter rules requiring them to leave during the day.

- Lack of safe shelter beds.

RESPONSE: REFRAME FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS: LEARN, EDUCATE, AND TRAIN

Adopting a **Human Rights** approach to park management emphasizes the right of people experiencing homelessness to exist in public spaces and to have their basic needs met.[4] A human rights approach seeks to hold all levels of government accountable for the health and well-being of people experiencing homelessness.

Their displacement and forced removal from parks and public spaces contradicts the United Nations' Special Report on the Right to Adequate Housing[5] and should not be a policy in any community.

Guidelines for the Effective Implementation of the Right to Housing Elaborated under International Human Rights Law (UN General Assembly, December 2019)

1 Guarantee the right to housing as a fundamental human right

2 Take immediate steps to ensure the progressive realization of the right to adequate housing

3 Ensure meaningful participation in the design, implementation and monitoring of housing policies and decisions

4 Implement comprehensive strategies for the realization of the right to housing

5 Eliminate homelessness in the shortest possible time and stop the criminalization of persons living in homelessness

6 Prohibit forced evictions and prevent evictions whenever possible

7 Upgrade informal settlements incorporating a human rights–based approach

8 Address discrimination and ensure equality

9 Ensure gender equality in housing and land

10 Ensure the right to adequate housing for migrants and internally displaced persons

11 Ensure the capacity and accountability of local and regional governments for the realization of the right to adequate housing

12 Ensure the regulation of businesses in a manner consistent with State obligations and address the financialization of housing

13 Ensure that the right to housing informs and is responsive to climate change and address the effects of the climate crisis on the right to housing

14 Engage in international cooperation to ensure the realization of the right to adequate housing

15 Ensure effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms

16 Ensure access to justice for all aspects of the right to housing

RESPONSE: REFRAME FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS: LEARN, EDUCATE, AND TRAIN

Community leaders can reframe their approach to addressing homelessness in parks by first acknowledging that people experiencing homelessness are legitimate park users. parks. Parks Master Plans and Age Friendly Parks and Public Spaces Strategies, and Youth and Senior Strategies rarely identify people experiencing homelessness as a user group with specific needs to address. Many communities aspire to create parks and public spaces for "all" yet through their policy language fail to acknowledge people experiencing homelessness as included under this umbrella. In some cases, the forced removal of people experiencing homelessness is often justified by citing the importance of "safety of all park users," the underlying assumption being that the safety concerns and needs of people experiencing homelessness are not included or somehow less valid.

To create parks that are safe and comfortable for everyone, we need to acknowledge that people in parks have diverse safety concerns. We also must acknowledge that the perception and experience of safety will vary, depending on people's social status and intersecting identities (age, ability, gender, gender expression, race, ethnicity, cultural background, income, and housing security status).

People experiencing homelessness are often criminalized and excluded from public parks based on false assumptions that they may commit a violent crime. There is no evidence to indicate this is the case. On the contrary, people experiencing homelessness are more likely to be a victim of violent crime.[6] Women experiencing homelessness are at an even higher risk of violence and sexual abuse than men.

Training and educating parks advocates, policymakers, community leaders, residents, elected officials, and local business owners can help build more inclusive policies and practices for addressing homelessness in parks by using an anti-othering approach.

Encourage decision-makers to get out of their comfort zones and listen to the experiences of people undergoing homelessness and the trained frontline workers who actively support and provide care to the homeless population.

Building the language and skills of anti-oppression and creating space for self-reflection around biases can empower park managers, advocates, and elected officials to play a role in elevating understanding and educating the public on the systemic drivers of homelessness.

For example, in Salt Lake City, Utah, a public education campaign was championed by the Parks and Recreation Department. The campaign sought to challenge misconceptions and respond to public concerns and complaints about the presence of people experiencing homelessness in parks. The talking points and public statements included the following:

- Everybody is welcome to use parks and public spaces for recreation, relaxation, rest, and leisure.
- Those experiencing homelessness are part of our community.
- Depending on individual circumstances and available community resources, securing housing can take longer than six months. [7]

These perspectives and insights can bolster support for permanent solutions that end chronic homelessness through Housing First policies and investments.

Creating inclusive parks and public spaces cannot be decoupled from housing justice. Advocating for safe "parks for all" should be synonymous with advocating for housing and human rights.
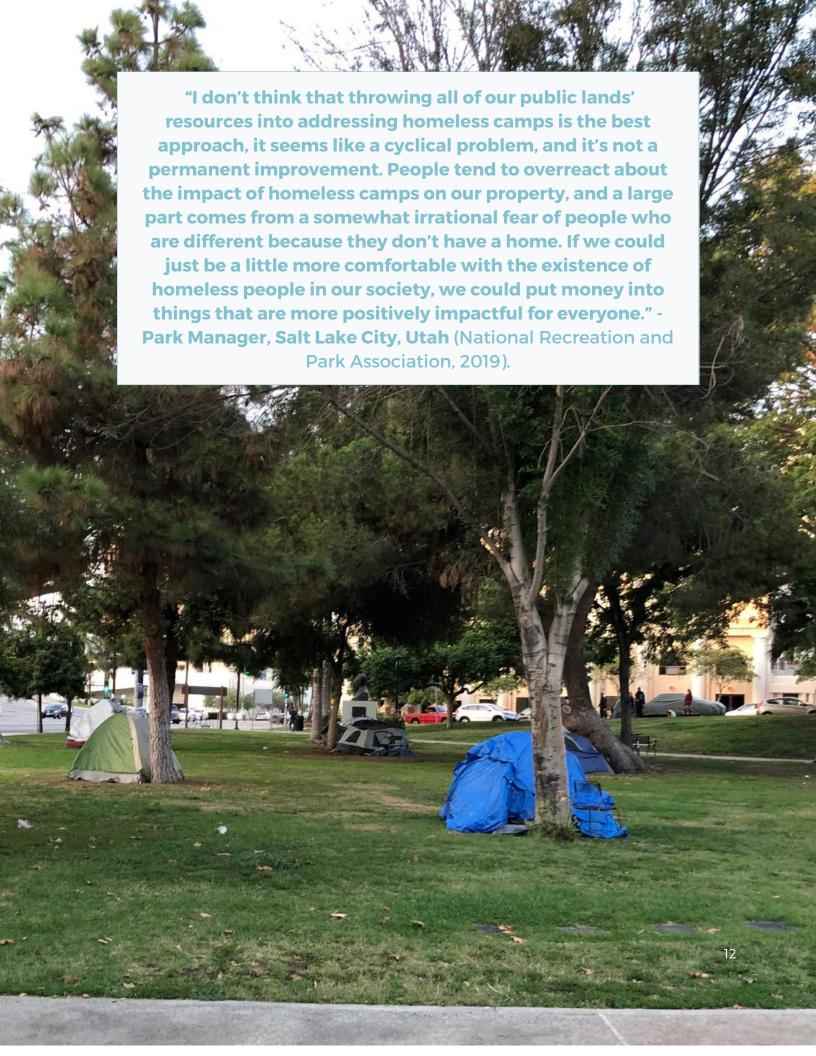
ISSUE 2: CRIMINALIZATION AND FORCED REMOVAL

The razing of homeless encampments, known as "'sweeps," is violent and cruel yet is still one of the most common "solutions" cities pursue to address homelessness in parks. In many jurisdictions, police strictly enforce local ordinances covering acts such as jaywalking, loitering, and public urination. Current ordinances also **criminalize** basic service provisions for people experiencing homelessness in parks. In San Jose, California, providing food to people in parks who are experiencing homelessness is a violation of a local ordinance (Solis, 2021).

BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color) and gender-diverse individuals and families are also more likely to experience over-policing in parks and public spaces and to face additional barriers to access to services.

The **forceful removal** of people experiencing homelessness from public parks under the guise of safety is counterproductive. It often makes an already vulnerable population even more vulnerable by pushing them into more and more isolated and unsafe areas. Park managers in Salt Lake City said the removal of people experiencing homelessness has resulted in their relocation to another area in the park, where the process of displacement then starts all over again.

This is a costly process that does not benefit park users of any socioeconomic status. The removal of tents and sleeping bags from parks is a response to the symptoms of homelessness that can further jeopardize the precarious circumstances of people experiencing homelessness.

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"I don't think that throwing all of our public lands' resources into addressing homeless camps is the best approach, it seems like a cyclical problem, and it's not a permanent improvement. People tend to overreact about the impact of homeless camps on our property, and a large part comes from a somewhat irrational fear of people who are different because they don't have a home. If we could just be a little more comfortable with the existence of homeless people in our society, we could put money into things that are more positively impactful for everyone." - Park Manager, Salt Lake City, Utah (National Recreation and Park Association, 2019).

While forcibly removing people experiencing homelessness is not the appropriate solution, neither are permanent encampments. Living in encampments is unsafe for people experiencing homelessness and can negatively impact nearby residents' ability to use and enjoy the park or public space. The goal for any city addressing encampments and homelessness in parks should be to work collectively and, at the speed of trust, to get the people experiencing homelessness the housing and support they need.

Policing and enforcement will not resolve homelessness; only compassion, social services, and housing will. Innovative approaches are needed, with support and outreach based on empathy, trust-building, and inclusive engagement rather than punishment and displacement.

Trauma-informed care is what's needed. That means acknowledging that people experiencing homelessness often have a history of trauma. People working in park management should be trained in trauma-informed approaches, which focus on creating environments of healing and recovery and creating an organizational culture of understanding and respect and appropriately responding to the effects of trauma. Removing tents and the belongings of a person experiencing homelessness can compound trauma and does not foster the compassion and trust that the public realm should embody.

Veterans are overrepresented in the homeless population and often have invisible wounds of war such as post-traumatic stress disorder. This is only exacerbated by the lack of affordable housing. The U.S Department of Housing and Urban Development's Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program, which provides permanent supportive housing and supportive programs to veterans, has proved effective in reducing homelessness among this population.[8]

The City of Boston's Department of Health, in collaboration with the city's Healthcare for the Homeless Program, has used a trauma-informed approach when assisting those experiencing homelessness. This collaboration introduced street outreach workers who are trained in trauma-informed care with special considerations for LGBTQ+ youth. Understanding that the struggles of people experiencing homelessness are unique to the individual and that their situation is rooted in trauma is key to challenging broad misunderstandings of the causes of homelessness (Keuroghlian, 2021).

RESPONSE: TRAUMA-INFORMED APPROACHES & COMPASSIONATE ALTERNATIVES TO ENFORCEMENT

Both human rights and trauma-informed care can be adapted to park management, policy, and planning. Park managers in Salt Lake City have partnered with service providers to connect people experiencing homelessness to shelter and housing supports and have moved away from their former policy of displacement.

Many cities across the U.S. have halted sweeps during COVID-19 with shelters closing and people having nowhere else to turn. Many cities implemented emergency measures, moving people experiencing homelessness into hotels and other temporary facilities. Building on these precedents, the communities that took swift action and created more spaces for people experiencing homelessness can re-evaluate the use of restrictive and oppressive policies, ordinances, and criminal enforcement.

Police should not be first responders for people experiencing homelessness unless there are emergencies pertaining to those people's or others' physical well-being. Police officers and first responders should be given training in trauma-based approaches to ensure that interactions are productive.

In Toronto, Ontario, **Street Outreach** teams have adopted an approach that combines compassion and service provision. Street Outreach workers are armed with Naloxone, knowledge, training, and connections to social services and resources as they walk through parks and public spaces where people experiencing homelessness gather. The support of outreach workers in getting simple items like documentation, accessing a computer, or making phone calls for their clients can make all the difference in helping people overcome homelessness.[9]

ISSUE 3: HOSTILE ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN

Parks and public spaces featuring **hostile architecture** were designed to control or repel certain groups of people who are perceived as undesirable. Hostile architecture includes benches that prevent people lying down, spikes on curbs and corners to prevent camping and panhandling, and bollards and boulders to prevent the erection of tents. Hostile architecture and design also includes the installation of blue lights in washrooms to discourage intravenous drug use, timed washroom use with automated door openings, and fees for seating.

Making a place hostile means making it harder for everyone to enjoy the park or public space. This erodes public life and means many of our parks are failing to live up to their potential. Communities need to embrace inclusive design and management if they want to fully reap the many benefits parks and public spaces can provide to community health and well-being.

RESPONSE: DESIGN WITH DIGNITY

Designing with dignity means that parks and public spaces should project a sense of belonging and ownership to all. People experiencing homelessness can coexist in a park with local residents and visitors, and inclusive design plays a key role in facilitating that.

Pershing Square Park in downtown Los Angeles, California, underwent redevelopment in an attempt to remove people experiencing homelessness through hostile architecture. But the desolate nature of the redesign deterred many other users in the process. More recent adaptions have acknowledged the diversity of users of this space and have included open sight lines, and multigenerational programming year-round. The addition of shade, cafes, and water features in the design ensures the comfort of all users (Gabel-Scheinbaum, 2017).

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RESPONSE: DESIGN WITH DIGNITY

Designing parks and public spaces for dignity does not require large capital investments but can, rather, be done by adding a touch point to access services.

Atlanta's Woodruff Park has a case manager committed to meeting the needs of people experiencing homelessness. Rather than ignoring them or attempting to force them from the park with hostile architecture, the case manager uses a colorful mobile cart to bring comfort to uncomfortable situations. The cart serves as a hub for tourist information and provides board games and materials for other activities for all park users. The cart provides a place for people experiencing homelessness to connect with social services as part of a partnership with HOPE Atlanta. The cart and social services are part of Atlanta's Housing First strategy (Madison, 2021).

Designing for dignity is a recognition that people experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity will always inhabit parks and public spaces and that hostile design will never resolve the root causes of homelessness.

Photo: Soloman, 2020.

HOW TO DESIGN WITH DIGNITY

Park designs should be inclusive for all users, including those experiencing homelessness. To design a space with dignity for all, the following approaches should be adopted:

1 Remove hostile architecture and amend or replace such elements with infrastructure that supports safe and comfortable activity for all users to stay.

2 Introduce year-round washrooms, water fountains, hand washing, and sanitation facilities. Part of designing for dignity is to acknowledge the human needs of all parks users. Fitting parks with washrooms creates a quality space for people experiencing homelessness, but also for pregnant and menstruating women, small children, older adults, and others.

3 Signage and ordinances that "close" a park at certain times or prohibit loitering are exclusive and discriminatory toward people experiencing homelessness. Parks and public spaces can be made more welcoming by creating signage and public art that clearly indicates the space is open for everyone. Lighting and rainbow flags are common symbols that folks from the LGBTQ2S community have embraced as symbols that help make a space inclusive.

Cities have often structured their traditional consultations in a way that favors certain segments of the population over others. **Public consultations** like town hall meetings, public hearings, and deputations at city hall **do not tend to meet the needs of underserved and underrepresented voices.**

The development of affordable housing, shelters, and support services often meets significant opposition during community consultation processes, which paradoxically exacerbates homelessness. The term NIMBY ("not in my back yard") is used to reflect community opposition to any sort of supposedly undesirable development or presence in a neighborhood. This phenomenon is connected to predominant social attitudes and stigmas around people experiencing homelessness. (See Issue 1: Misconceptions, Stigma and Bias pg 8.)

Exclusionary zoning policies and practices also keep affordable housing out of certain neighborhoods through land use and building code requirements that further entrench racial and economic segregation and exclusion.

The financialization of housing has also further cemented housing as a commodity or financial asset as opposed to a public good and human right.[10]

Similarly, the presence of people experiencing homelessness in parks can elicit strong opposition from residents worried that the presence of unhoused people will decrease property values, negatively impact local businesses, and/or lead to a decline in quality of life and enjoyment of the public space.

RESPONSE: INCLUSIVE ENGAGEMENT, ACTIVITIES, AND PROGRAMMING

Building relationships with a variety of stakeholders is a vital way of getting them to support affordable housing and social inclusion in parks and public spaces. **Multifaceted engagement** is the key. That can include walk audits, site visits, community workshops, focus groups, and interviews. By employing such tactics, park and public space planners can directly address safety and accessibility concerns raised by residents, local businesses, shelter representatives, and park managers. This engagement must include ongoing dialogue, transparent and proactive planning, and community organizing. Ultimately, it will lead to improved safety, positive social interactions, and greater comfort for all users.

People experiencing homelessness are members of the community and therefore important stakeholders in the process of improving parks and public spaces. Danish artist and social activist Kenneth Balfelt describes them as "super users" of parks. Through his work, Balfelt seeks to include people experiencing homelessness as co-producers in the design of public spaces, and acknowledges that they have intimate knowledge and expertise on how parks function, and how they can be improved.[11]

Engagement with people experiencing homelessness can also occur through programs and activities that respond to their needs: free Friday night suppers, game nights, affordable food markets, clothing exchanges, free bicycle repair, free yoga or tai chi classes, star gazing. Anyone can benefit from such park programming. In Los Angeles County, Parks After Dark[12] offers free after-hours arts and health workshops, movies, and live music. People of all ages are encouraged to participate. The program is used as a crime prevention strategy and a way to create a sense of welcome for all.

Building trust and creating meaningful relationships with those experiencing homelessness is key to moving forward. However, that requires patience and time. It can take weeks, months, or even years. Pride, mental health, addiction, trauma, and broken trust often prevent people from asking for or accepting help. Park staff who will be interacting with people experiencing homelessness must be properly trained. (See trauma-informed approaches, page 13.) Deadlines for forced removal can immediately erase any trust that may have been established with frontline case workers and social service providers.

ISSUE 5: SILOED, DISCONNECTED, AND UNDERFUNDED SERVICES AND SUPPORTS

Many cities and agencies are siloed in their efforts when dealing with issues surrounding homelessness. While homelessness is evident in parks and public spaces, park managers do not often have the funding, capacity, or proper training to address the issue holistically.

Supports and social services are often found in larger cities but may not be accessible to people experiencing homelessness in rural places. Data on rural homelessness is often inaccurate because in cities it is typically compiled by researchers who walk through communities and manually count those visibly experiencing homelessness. In rural communities, those experiencing homelessness are often invisible because they rely on family and friends for support and a place to stay.

A lack of public transportation creates an imposing barrier for those experiencing homelessness in rural areas. There, homelessness is described as more transient compared with urban areas. Federal funding to social services is dependent on these counts, leaving rural areas at a disadvantage. In rural contexts, integrated and coordinated supports are harder to come by.

RESPONSE: INTEGRATED AND COORDINATED RESPONSES, PARTNERSHIPS, AND INVESTMENT

Parks departments should work hand in hand with service providers and shelter services to provide integrated services that move people into places where they feel safe and help them access any services they need.

Cities need to take an active approach to homelessness. That includes creating strong partnerships with internal departments and external groups like nonprofits, private organizations, and religious affiliates to connect people experiencing homelessness to needed services. Local governments can partner with service providers to amplify access to programs for people experiencing homelessness.

For example, the lack of photo identification is a major barrier for many people experiencing homelessness, preventing access to jobs or signing leases for housing. Connecting people who are living in parks with legal aid can make a critical difference in their ability to access stable living accommodations.

RESPONSE: INTEGRATED AND COORDINATED RESPONSES, PARTNERSHIPS, AND INVESTMENT

The City of Denver partnered with Bayaud Enterprises, an employment-services organization, to create Denver WorkDays. The program secures full-time, seasonal employment in park maintenance for those experiencing homelessness or precarious housing and also for people with criminal records. This partnership also provides a connection to external housing and rehabilitation services (Bayaud Enterprises, 2021).

The City of Seattle's JustCARE model program eliminates encampments without displacement or the use of police, focusing instead on coordinated support services. JustCARE is a novel collective impact model that simultaneously reduces unsheltered homelessness, barriers to health care, and the harm caused by the criminal legal system—even as it improves public safety and quality of life. The program was started in the summer of 2020 by several community partners and provides interim housing to people contending with unstable income, homelessness, substance use disorders, unsupported mental health disabilities, or criminal-justice issues.

Throughout its operations, JustCARE draws on the harm reduction philosophy, focuses on building constructive and trusting relationships, and employs a racial equity lens to ensure that the intervention mainly benefits Black, Indigenous, and other people of color.[13]

JustCARE improves individual and neighborhood safety by moving people from encampments to hotels. Participants and community partners alike report high levels of satisfaction with this aspect of the intervention. JustCARE outreach teams also coordinate care and support for people whose behavior disturbs neighbors but who cannot be placed in hotels. Their overarching goal is to reduce harm and improve quality of life for all concerned parties.

Elected leaders in both urban and rural communities need to support measures to invest in proper housing, services, and support for people experiencing homelessness within municipal, state and federal budgets. There is a higher cost to society in doing nothing.

A chronically homeless person costs taxpayers an average of $35,578 per year. Permanent housing reduces the use of publicly funded crisis services, including incarceration, hospitalization, and emergency departments on average by 49.5%![14]
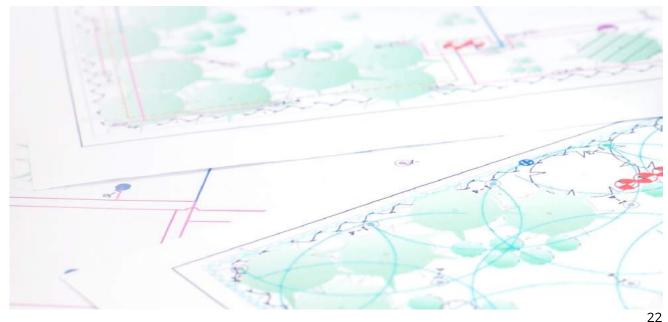*(National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2017)*

Homelessness materializes in parks and public spaces due to several failures in public policy. Racist housing policies and practices that discriminate against Black, Indigenous, and people of color, such as redlining, exclusionary zoning, discriminatory mortgage lending, and segregation have had wide-ranging effects on who has and has not benefited from homeownership and the right to safe, adequate, and affordable housing.

People living with disabilities are also at a higher risk of experiencing homelessness and facing additional barriers to housing and employment and are more likely to be living in poverty.

Native Americans have the second highest rate of homelessness among racial and ethnic groups. However, detailed data is limited[15] Colonization and the effects of intergenerational trauma have shaped the experiences of Native Americans experiencing housing insecurity and homelessness.

The fight for safe, adequate of housing is a longstanding issue tied to **deep-rooted inequitable policies** in housing, development, and transportation. Also relevant are the interconnected systems that perpetuate inequities and marginalization, including criminal justice, child welfare, and health care. These systems do not provide equitable access and can compound and exacerbate the vulnerability and risk of homelessness for people of color, women, LGBTQ2S, people with disabilities, and low-income people.

People experiencing homelessness have been systematically failed by their institutions and this fact needs to inform the ways in which social services are designed. They can perpetuate broken trust, and shelters can create barriers and restrictions for access, which has often fueled the retreat to parks and public spaces by people experiencing homelessness.

Municipal governments must evaluate and reform policies, strategic documents, and public space plans through an equity and anti-racist/anti-othering lens.

Systemic racism and marginalization have impacted policies in housing policy and planning, parks and public space design, and transportation planning and investment. Culturally relevant services, cultural representation in frontline staff, and cultural competency and training are particularly important when working with equity-deserving groups, including Black, Indigenous, and people of color folks.

Superintendent Ed Solis of the City of San Jose's Parks and Recreation Department noted in a 2021 interview that people experiencing homelessness have needs pertaining to their individual position, belief system, previous trauma, abilities, and more. He believes relationship building is important in the creation of an individualized response to people experiencing homelessness and that the resulting relationship can foster trust.[16] The City of Albuquerque's Office of Native American Affairs has created a Native American Homelessness Task Force. The task force has worked closely with external partners such as First Nations Community Healthsource to ensure culturally relevant service provision and amenities to the affected populations.[17]

Albuquerque's Homelessness Task Force, a part of the city's Office of Equity and Inclusion, evaluates existing policies through an anti-racist and equity lens.

Some of the priorities identified by the task force are:[18]

- Appointing a tribal liaison for the city to directly coordinate with tribal leadership and programs.

- Developing and delivering cultural humility training to service providers and other city employees who interact with Native Americans.

- Developing mechanisms to foster collaboration and develop connections between programs for Native American families and individuals.

- Identifying additional funding for caseworkers assist Native American homeless people.

- Initiating public-private-tribal partnerships to increase public housing for Native Americans on the verge of homelessness.

- Developing a resource directory of existing programs and services available to all homeless persons that also highlights programs and services specifically for Native Americans.

RESPONSE: EVALUATE AND REFORM POLICIES WITH AN EQUITY LENS

Don't accept homelessness as inevitable. Cities and communities can commit to eliminating homelessness by setting ambitious goals and targets and embracing Housing First policies. Such policies aim to get people out of homelessness and into housing as quickly as possible without preconditions such as sobriety programs, drug tests, or criminal reference checks. Cities like Helsinki, Finland, have proved this can be successful and have significantly reduced homelessness with radical reforms that included Housing First policies coupled with social support.[19]

Research published by the Urban Institute in 2021 points to success stories in Denver, Colorado. The Denver Supportive Housing Social Impact Bond Initiative (Denver SIB) was launched in 2014, providing supportive housing through a Housing First approach. Funding came from private investors through a social impact bond, along with public dollars from Medicaid and housing assistance programs. Innovative pay-for-success financing helped fund housing for hundreds of individuals experiencing chronic homelessness, The five-year findings show most people stayed in the supportive housing in the long term and their police interactions went down.[20]

CONCLUSION

Investing in great parks and public spaces cannot solve the issue of chronic homelessness. However, communities do have a choice to stop the rising tide of homelessness, which disproportionately impacts our senior population.

We know the proven solutions to ending chronic homelessness. This document provides promising approaches for addressing homelessness as it becomes more visible and prevalent in our parks and public spaces. Those approaches involve viewing the problem through equity and human rights lenses.

People experiencing homelessness are human beings deserving of respect and dignity. They are legitimate park users with needs that can be addressed through compassionate approaches that focus on trust building, individualized support, and access to safe, affordable housing.

As cities and communities turn toward recovery from COVID-19, our parks and public spaces must embody a renewed commitment to creating healthy places where everyone belongs.

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