Homelessness In the Bay Area Explored at The Thacher School

BY THE EDITORS

Nestled in a global hub of innovation and wealth, the San Francisco Bay Area’s homeless population is rapidly growing, and with it an increased sense of frustration and unease. A region otherwise prized for its economic, social, and technological advancement was home to more than 28,200 homeless individuals in 2017. As the city’s Tenderloin neighborhood transforms into a haven for numerous unhoused residents, homeless camps around the Bay Area from Oakland to Santa Rosa call attention to the region’s vast wealth inequality and housing shortages. Homeless encampments also compel Bay Area residents and politicians to grapple with one of the nation’s most glaring emergencies: a profound and manifest opioid epidemic. The New York Times San Francisco Bureau Chief Thomas Fuller described homelessness as “the problem of our times,” one whose effects are varied and therefore difficult to fix. Given that only an hour and a half from Silicon Valley, people are living in what Fuller could only call “refuge camp,” he said, “We don’t catch people when they fall as well as other societies all over the world.

Through this newspaper, we aim to educate the Thacher community about homelessness in San Francisco. We will grapple with its roots, quandaries, and possible solutions. While it is harrowingly simple to overlook the homelessness crisis pervading the Bay Area and America in general, we hope to spread public awareness and inspire motivation to effect change. This work is critical because ultimately, homelessness calls into question our morality, our ethics, and the fabric of our capitalist society.

Amidst Economic Boom, Bay Area Trampled by Housing Crisis and Homelessness

BY SYDNEY ROSENBAUM

On a morning walk through Northern California’s Bay Area, you’ll gaze up at the mighty facade of profound technology and finance corporations while occasionally peering down at shadows slumped on sidewalks, caked in dirt and emanating a ghastly stench.

A startling volume of homeless people live in the Bay. They drudge through days behind infrastructure, cramped in cars, and crouched in tents. In May 2019, the San Francisco homeless population alone rose to 8,011, a 17-year high. 1 London Breed, mayor of the city, said, “We have more to do to provide more shelter, more exits from homelessness, and to prevent people from becoming homeless in the first place.” The worsening condition of homelessness, coupled with political crusades and advocacy movements, makes it a universal concern. Simply enough, real estate is among the most notorious roots of the Bay’s homelessness problem.

Once a staple of American life, national homeownership is waning; in California, homeownership is its lowest since 1950. 2 The state simply has not produced enough housing units to match its explosive population and job growth. The Bay Area offers 4.1 million jobs, up from 3.3 million in 2009, amounting to an astounding 23% increase over a mere decade. 3 Yet, housing has plateaued. Between 2011 and 2017, the Bay added 5.4 new jobs for each housing unit. 4 This disparity leads to nothing short of a crisis: from 1999-2014, the Bay Area built 61,000 fewer low-income housing units than prescribed. 5 There are a variety of factors that exacerbate this housing crisis and indirectly force people into homelessness.

Foremost, Northern California is notorious for lofty construction costs. San Francisco demands the world’s second-highest costs of construction; on average, apartments cost $425,000 to build. As a result, new developments must cater to well-heeled tenants or attract compelling public subsidies. Further, developers face an onslaught of delays by policies designed to protect historic neighborhoods and stunt cheap construction. Height and density limits are stifling forces as well. 6 Excessive fees also deter construction. Proposition 13, approved by California voters in 1978, mandates that property taxes can only escalate at a maximum of 2% annually. 7 At times, the measure limits property-tax rises on homes until they are sold entirely. Thus, as home values rise, entitled owners pay disproportionately low rates, and the city procures lost revenue through extra stipends for newcomers.

It is near impossible for the middle and lower classes to find pre-existing affordable housing options. Across the Bay Area’s nine counties, real estate prices are surging. The median home in San Francisco is worth $1.5 million, and two-bedroom apartments average $4,500 per month. 8 Further, according to the California Association of Realtors, the minimum income to qualify for purchasing a San Francisco house is $254,000, while the city’s median income lies at $80,000. 9 The housing market leaves lower classes desolate, insolvent, and occasionally, homeless. Below Market Rate units, or MBRs, are sorely needed.

The Bay Area homeless and housing crisis fuels class warfare at times. Santa Rosa is home to the largest homeless encampment in the history of the United States. 10 A mile-long strip with over 300 residents, the Santa Rosa encampment faces backlash from local residents and businesses aiming to preserve the neighborhood. 11 Locals are appalled by the

4 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Steinicke, Susan. “Effects Of Housing Crisis, Homelessness Permeate State Of Living In The Bay Area.” CBS SF Bay Area, 16 September 2019.
9 Ibid.
11 Editors of Bay Area Council Economic Institute. “Bay Area Homelessness.”
13 Ibid.
14 Steinicke, Susan. “Effects Of Housing Crisis, Homelessness.”
15 Ibid.
16 Kim, Frederick. “San Francisco has become one huge metaphor for economic inequality in America.” Quartz, 21 June 2016.
18 Ibid.
scrap, grime, and drug paraphernalia polluting the streets. While Santa Rosa is one concentration of homeless people, such conflict pervades neighborhoods throughout the Bay.

Bay Area cities make concentrated efforts to deter and destroy homeless encampments. Some San Francisco districts install sidewalks with boulders, parks with conveniently-placed railings, and benches with individual seats.18 Residents routinely oppose city plans to construct homeless shelters adjacent to wealthy districts with offices andcondos. One San Francisco technology employee said to The New York Times, “Putting mentally ill people and people with drug abuse problems in a residential area is careless.”21

In the Bay, Silicon Valley giants like Google, Facebook, and Apple lead the charge of gentrification. While innovative corporations advance employment opportunities and attract a slew of highly-educated residents, they raise housing costs and the price of living. Low-income families feel the weight of their presence most. Some poor residents are forced onto the streets while others flee to the outskirts of the city, placing themselves at heightened risk for climate disasters.22

The Bay Area is not alone in its plight. Chris Herbert, director of the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard, said that the Bay’s economic disparity is simply “more extreme” than elsewhere and that San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland are harbinger for other developing American cities.23

The state of homelessness in the Bay Area forces into question a Darwinian economic and social order. According to San Francisco New York Times, Chief, Thomas Fuller, as billionaires and the destitute intermingling in the Bay’s unique urban structure, the city comes to exemplify “the extremes of American capitalism.”24

The Bay Area, and all American cities, embraces a strict rule of law that encourages business and fosters innovation, mobilizing the wealthiest, most powerful nation in the world. Yet, on a grandiose scale, the city is detached as some residents are impaired by its successes.

Bay Area politicians recognize their housing problem. Oakland mayor Libby Schaaf explained the severity of the city’s severe housing shortage, maintaining that she “want[s] people to recognize that housing is a human right,” and that “people die without adequate shelter.”25

Homelessness cannot be addressed without considering homes themselves. Homes, especially in the Bay Area, are reflective of an increasingly lopsided economy. Homes and homelessness implicate our economic, social, and political systems, and they will continue to do so until Northern California mitigates the clandestine effects of its own prosperity.

In other words, Bay Area cities are creating a new landscape where the poor are pushed to the edges of the city in order to create space for the rich. This process is not only detrimental to the residents who are being pushed out, but also to the city as a whole. By allowing homelessness and gentrification to continue unchecked, the Bay Area is sacrificing its vitality and becoming less habitable for all residents.

Ironically, another agent behind the Bay Area’s housing and homeless crisis is America’s roaring economy. We are in the midst of the longest expansionary period in American history; however, market vitality is by no means distributed evenly. The wealth gap increases steadily as the middle and lower classes lose steam. The top 1% of San Francisco residents earn an average of $3.6 million, 44 times the average of the bottom 99%. Further, the San Francisco 1% earn 30.8% of the total income, up from 15.8% in 1989.26

These drastic financial dynamics depress the Bay’s housing market and homelessness crisis. According to Bloomberg, “The US has been building far fewer houses than it usually does, pushing prices further out of reach for a vast portion of the population that has barely seen incomes rise.”27 While wealthier individuals keep up with housing prices, all others do not.

The streets of San Francisco are not just the stomping ground for America’s wealthiest tech tycoons—they are laded with human feces and used heroin needles. As the unsheathed population rises, particularly in the city’s Tenderloin neighborhood, the immediate of street cleanliness has not escaped the public eye. From the city’s locally-termed “poop patrol” to the new app SnapcSnapc, San Francisco is rapidly becoming a focal point of poor sanitation, opioid addiction, and homelessness.28

As of 2018, approximately 4,400 homeless people occupy the Tenderloin. Their presence illuminates the city’s struggle to maintain sanitary conditions, as it has already replaced 300 lamp posts in the last three years due to urine damage.29 Perhaps the greater health concern, however, is the volume of heroin needles littering San Francisco streets. From 2015 to 2018, the number of complaints about heroin needles rose from less than 3,000 to 7,500, and statistics indicate that the impact of opioid addiction on the city grows each year.30

A crisis is unfolding throughout the Tenderloin, especially as the synthetic opioid fentanyl is becoming more accessible and can be mixed with natural opioids such as heroin for often lethal effects.31 Fentanyl is the leading cause of death by opioid overdose in San Francisco and Dr. Phillip Coffin of the city’s Public Health Department said that fentanyl is “fairly established... It’s not going away anytime soon.”32

The crisis appears to be spreading beyond only the Tenderloin. “It’s like third world squaral,” said San Francisco

19 Ibid.
21 Ken, Frederick. “San Francisco has become one huge metaphor.” 22 Ibid.
23 Buhayon, Noah and Christopher Cannon, “How California Became America’s.”
24 Fuller.
25 Ibid.
27 Buhayon.
28 Ibid.
29 Interview by Thomas Fuller, 22 January 2020.
30 Steimle, Susie, “Effects Of Housing Crisis, Homelessness.”
31 Buhayon.
32 Ibid.
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Discrimination and Abuse on the Rise throughout Bay Area’s Homeless Population

BY ELSE NYE

In San Francisco, a city associated with technological success, a strong economy, and progressive social initiatives, issues of historical racism and discrimination have been swept out of the public view and manifested in increasingly large homeless communities. Mass wealth is undeniably present, with reports from Fox estimating one billionaire for every 11,600 people, but economic vulnerability and escalating housing costs have allowed for dramatic wealth inequality.64 In the liberal city made attractive by figures from figures like Supervisor Harvey Milk and Mayor London Breed, it is easy to ignore the fact that economic inequalities and homelessness disproportionately affect people of color as well as members of the LGBTQ+ community. The appealing, expensive urban terrain loses its luster as wrongful treatment of African American, transgender, and other marginalized groups is revealed as a central cause of homelessness. Institutionalized economic and social obstacles make homelessness almost inevitable for many people, and unaddressed cultures of sexual assault and other forms of harassment make a solution much more emergent yet complex.

The Supporting Partnerships for Anti-Racist Communities initiative reported that while 5.5% of San Francisco’s population is black, over 40% of the city’s homeless people are black, showing that this pertinent humanitarian issue affects people of color at hugely disproportional rates.65 Latinx and Native Americans are also significantly overrepresented in the Bay Area homeless population. Much of these statistical disparities come as a result of historical and ongoing discrimination in a variety of areas including housing, jobs, health care, and criminal justice.66 As Jeff Kositsky, director of the San Francisco Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing, said, “We need to look at issues such as housing policies, education, and racial injustice if we are to permanently end homelessness.”67

11 Simon
12 Ibid.
15 Rufo
19 Goodhough, SABISSA. November 22, 2019.
20 Goodhough
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 “Office of the Mayor.” Mayor Mark Farrell Announces Innovative Program to Fight Opioid Crisis on San Francisco Streets (Office of the Mayor). Simon
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
Homelessness in Bayview, San Francisco. (2018) The Bay Area’s housing crisis truly does have racist origins, which have perhaps cultivated the systematic nature that has allowed for such disproportionate effects of homelessness. San Francisco in particular, a city historically flooded with immigration, has a disconnecting record of strict zoning laws built to target low-income people of color. Anti-Chinese housing policies from the 19th century along with “racially restrictive covenants” in the 20th century set the stage for today’s issues. Landowners inserted ownership requirements into building deeds that especially targeted black people and racially-motivated redlining made it incredibly difficult for people of color to remain economically stable. Even figures like baseball legend Willie Mays struggled to buy a home in an affluent neighborhood due to the racist social culture. Lexi Pandell of the New Republic argues that the origins of San Francisco’s housing restrictions were “every bit as racially motivated as Trump’s immigration policies today,” which many San Franciscans politicians now oppose. Their hypocrisy thus lies in the ongoing implications of these historical discriminatory policies, as revealed in the experiences of homeless inhabitants of the Bay Area. Another source of discrimination and concern in the Bay Area homeless community is for LGBTQ+ people, particularly youth. Over 48% of San Francisco’s homeless youth are LGBTQ+ and are not only more likely to experience homelessness but also struggle significantly with the limited services. As Supervisor Aaron Peskin said, “Homelessness is acutely an LGBTQ issue, particularly for trans and gender non-conforming folks,” as transgender people are 18 times more likely to experience homelessness. However, more supportive shelters are being incorporated in the city. In May of 2019, the first long-term transitional living program specifically designed for transgender youth was established in San Francisco after statistics revealed that over 10% of homeless youth identified as transgender and one in five transgender individuals experience homelessness in the United States. On January 23, 2020, Mayor London Breed cut the ribbon on the first transitional housing for gender non-conforming transitional house, a 13 unit program funded by the city. However, discrimination still prevails against transgender people in the majority of shelters, where they can be forced to use the bathrooms of their sex assigned at birth or cornered by gendered sleeping spaces. Additionally, there are still reports of shelters denying people based on gender identity or sexuality despite the Bay Area’s progressive reputation. The image of San Francisco as a place of acceptance is attractive to many people in the LGBTQ+ community, but the lack of resources to accommodate this historical pilgrimage of gay and transgender youth has only worsened the housing crisis in the expensive city. Yet despite these obstacles, statistics have revealed that gay homeless people are less likely to struggle with substance abuse or severe mental health problems compared to the general homeless population. Many homeless LGBTQ+ youth require assistance but are fearful of being sent back to abusive or unaccepting homes and have been scarred by social rejection that has contributed to their present conditions. A transgender woman named Justice found that homeless shelters felt almost as unsafe as home, as she faced sexual assault from residents and staff members. According to Rolling Stone Magazine, “Seventy percent of [trans youth] report being harassed or physically and sexually assaulted in a shelter,” and Justice’s traumatizing experiences are far too common. Justice said that she only found safety at an LGBTQ+ shelter, a welcoming and secure resource that is, unfortunately, quite limited. There are often several-month waits for beds in these specified shelters, which offer government programs to provide free hormones and help youth transition, as well as support their integration into society following homelessness. Safe shelters for women and survivors of sexual abuse are also limited, often having at least 5-6 week waits for assistance, during which a woman can face more violence and trauma. A study in 1997 found that 92% of homeless mothers experienced significant physical or sexual abuse and 43% experienced sexual abuse as children. Many homeless women are fleeing unsafe situations at home only to face disturbing rates of sexual and physical violence on the streets and in shelters. “Sexual abuse increases an individual’s probability of becoming homeless, and homelessness increases the risk of sexual victimization,” according to the Connecticut Alliance to End Sexual Violence. Sexual assault is too often absent from the homelessness conversation. Efforts have also revealed that it can be incredibly difficult to consistently treat homeless survivors when they don’t have regular access to a phone to call services and consistent contact information. The Coalition on Homelessness and San Francisco’s Rape Crisis Center have been collaborating to help the city better address these issues, but there is still a substantial necessity for increased support systems for homeless women. It is evident that homelessness disproportionately affects people of color, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and women and leaves them in dangerous conditions. For this humanitarian crisis to be solved, the city both legally and socially needs to investigate the discriminatory practices that underlie such a massive housing crisis.

Lincoln CEO Talks Homelessness’ Effects on Children and Families

BY MALENA SOLIN

Allison Becwar is the current President and CEO of Lincoln, an organization head-quartered in West Oakland and dedicated to halting the cycle of poverty in the Bay Area through programs aimed at providing individualized support in education, family life, and well-being. Becwar has been involved with Lincoln since 2000 and is deeply invested in supporting children and families through financial struggles and the issues that come along with them. Although Lincoln works with a broad spectrum of family situations, Becwar spoke with me about how Lincoln addresses homelessness with its families, as well as other

62 Downing, Shane. “They’re Here, They’re Queer, But Can They Stay?” The State Of Youth LGBTQ Housing In San Francisco.” Hoodline. 13 Aug. 2016.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 “Almost Half of SF’s Homeless Youth Are LGBTQ.” Medium
the influence of addiction, and the long-term impacts of such circumstances on children.

What are Lincoln’s first steps in providing aid to homeless families? Lincoln is primarily focused on working with children and youth and their families. Most of those families are eligible for Medi-Cal, so by definition they are living in poverty. A large proportion of the families we’re working with at any given time are dealing with homelessness. Most of the families we’re working with are not chronically homeless, but their families are hitting a point where they’ve exhausted their resources and sometimes that means folks are living out of a car, sometimes they’re couch surfing, sometimes they’re at a shelter.

A lot of the really important work is intensive case management, so it’s connecting our families with housing resources, often helping them navigate very complicated processes to qualify for housing or to get on a list for housing.

When families are homeless they are completely stressed. They’ve really exhausted all of their resources, both financial and mental. It’s an incredibly difficult time and so a lot of times we’re just there to help them with problem-solving and help them think about their network of support, who else they could be reaching out to. Depending on the program, sometimes we’re helping families with a deposit on a first month’s rent because they’re just needing to link to the next thing.

Because the kids are an entry point into the family, sometimes it’s navigating things with the school district and helping the family, because trying to get your kid to school is not the highest priority if you’re not sure where you’re sleeping that night. Also trying to work things out with the school districts because families are also then being asked to come into truancy court because they haven’t been sending their kids to school. [We are] trying to navigate that with the court system so that we’re not further penalizing a family or fining them, which unfortunately often happens, for not getting their kid to school and seeing how we can help them stabilize the housing.

Do you see any correlation between addiction and poverty?

There is a high comorbidity of mental health challenges and substance use. If you think about it on a continuum (substance use into substance abuse and dependency) that can sometimes be a difficult line to distinguish, but in many of the families, someone in the family is struggling with substance use. There are a lot of people who are undiagnosed for mental illness and some of it is self-medicating. Typically youth get referred to us because of their substance use issues, but I would say that we have a lot of caregivers who are also actively using. Some of that also makes it really hard to consistently hold employment.

I have seen folks who have gone down the path of addiction. You see the unraveling of other aspects of their life and an isolation from family, but more commonly we see people who are really struggling and often there is substance or alcohol use as well in the picture.

What has Lincoln seen as some of the greatest issues of homelessness in Oakland?

We are seeing such a massive displacement of families into other counties. Multigenerational families who have deep roots in West Oakland and East Oakland who are now out in East Contra Costa. There has been so much wealth pouring in, but it seems really concentrated and we’re just seeing so many families who unfortunately were renting and not owning their homes and so they’re getting booted because landlords can raise the rent three times the amount. I am not seeing the aggressive mix of undermarket and market housing together that I think would really help the situation in Oakland.

It’s just so striking because I’ve been in Oakland now coming up on 20 years and it just feels like the encampments have gotten significantly larger and more spread out but the housing prices are just continuing to skyrocket, so there just seems to be an even greater disparity which is why so many people are now out in East Contra Costa. The thing with that is that there is more affordable housing, but the services haven’t caught up with the need of the families that have moved out there.

Poverty isn’t just the financial stuff. There’s the trauma that comes with it with all the exposure, with community violence, poor access to quality schools, a lot of families with incarcerated caregivers, so grandmothers and aunts and uncles are stepping in. It’s just really fascinating to see how the services are trailing by five or six years.

What are the long term consequences for a child that has endured homelessness?

ACEs stand for adverse childhood experiences. Kaiser did a huge study in San Diego county around looking at adults’ physical health and how many childhood adverse experiences they had. Basically adults who had four or more adverse experiences as a child had all of these very strong correlations with heart disease and obesity, and all of these health issues were related to traumatic events as children.

Homelessness in and of itself is a traumatizing event and almost always is coupled with other traumatic experiences. Many things have had to go wrong in a number of ways for your family to end up in that situation. I would say the physical health, the mental health of a child experiencing homelessness, the outcomes around that for them in adulthood are pretty grim. Our new Surgeon General, Dr. Nadine Burke Harris, has been a huge proponent of looking at ACEs in her pediatric office when she was a practicing pediatrician in San Francisco where she would be screening for ACEs and intervening correspondingly based on those scores. That’s more on the state level, but I think it’ll have an impact in Oakland. It’s now getting a lot of attention that there are incredibly long-term negative impacts from childhood trauma and homelessness is one of those main experiences.

Statistical Information from San Francisco’s Point in Time Counts Reveal Depths of Homelessness Problem

BY WINSLOW ATKESON

Home to the nation’s third-largest homeless population, the San Francisco government vigilantly tracks the size, growth, and demographics of the thousands of homeless in the region.
Compiling data from previous counts, Figures 4 and 5 offer additional insight into homelessness in the Bay Area. Figure 4 represents the distribution of the homeless across the Bay Area, highlighting the large numbers of homeless in the San Francisco and Santa Clara counties. Meanwhile, Figure 5 displays specific population changes within the homeless population.

Despite the gross number of homeless rising, the number of sheltered homeless with access to beds has decreased.

Figure 6: Health Conditions

Figure 6 shows the myriad health conditions common among the Bay Area homeless. Importantly, this figure depicts rising rates of multiple conditions, notably PTSD and psychiatric conditions, within the homeless population. Additionally, this figure depicts the sheer magnitude of health concerns as an individual is more likely than not to suffer from multiple afflictions.

Figure 7: Subpopulations

The most recent Point in Time count (2019) included questions regarding specific demographics of the homeless population. Figure 7 offers information on three groups of specific interest: the chronically homeless, veterans, and unaccompanied youth. Meanwhile, Figure 8 breaks down the LGBTQ+ community within the homeless population. The values in Figure 8 are not indicative of the homeless population but the LGBTQ+ subpopulation.

Figures 9 and 10 display the cost of living in the Bay Area. Figure 9 follows the ever-rising median house price in San Francisco. For reference, the national average is around $200,000.

Figure 10: Housing Challenges

Figure 10 displays the prevalent reasons the homeless are not in houses. Increasingly, Figure 10 reflects Figure 9 as rising rent is the leading factor keeping the homeless out of houses. Moreover, Figure 10 once again displays the multitude of challenges faced by the homeless population of the Bay Area.

References:

Petry, Laura. “San Francisco Homelessness Count and Survey.”
Ibid.
Ibid.