

Homelessness into Crime: A Self-Caused Cycle

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Abstract

The rise in homelessness and crime has recently proliferated in a multitude of America's cities. However, this rise is a product of unfortunate and inescapable circumstances, poor policies, and stigmatizing stereotypes that make it so that one who is homeless may also likely be or become a criminal. In this paper, I observe the cycle of homelessness and crime to answer the question of how people can so easily fall victim to it, and what exactly perpetuates the problem. While it may seem as though crime is a cause of homelessness, it is actually the other way around, as many struggle to escape their poor living conditions because of the inhumane treatment they receive from our legal system. Through my findings, it was revealed that a multitude of public policies and societal stereotypes further cement those in poverty to stay in poverty, from the discriminatory nature of "Not in my Backyard" politics to the Prison-Industrial Complex that intentionally keeps inmates behind bars for the sake of profit. Ultimately, I argue that it is the corrupt criminal justice system and the way we treat those living on the streets as criminals that perpetuates homelessness. Whether it be through Universal Basic Income, which ensures that the impoverished have an economic safety net to allow them to pursue careers, or the Housing First Approach, which guarantees a roof to live under for those camped on the streets, we must proactively search for methods to dismantle economic disparity in our society.

Keywords: Homelessness, Crime, Income Inequality, Incarceration, Criminal Justice System, Public Policy

Introduction

When one thinks of a homeless person, associating them with crime and shady behavior is all too commonly seen. It may be dehumanizing, but even if subconsciously, we often cautiously stray away from the person sitting on the sidewalk, and seemingly for good reason. In recent years, the crime rate among the homeless population has increased exponentially, with statistics from the Council on Criminal Justice revealing that in 2022, "aggravated assaults and robberies both increased by 4% and 19% respectively"¹. However, this concurrent pattern is a product of America's oppressive justice system. In this paper, I aim to shed light on the reasons that push so many homeless people to resort to crime. Often, society forgets that the homeless are people too, since they are stripped of necessities to make crime an act of survival for them, increasing the rate of fines and punishments that make homelessness an inescapable prison. I will explain how the faulty policies of our criminal justice system create an endless cycle of crime punishment and homelessness and ultimately provide my own solutions to break that loop.

I. Motivations Behind Crime

¹ Bates, J. (2022, July 29). *U.S. crime still higher than pre-pandemic*. Time. <https://time.com/6201797/crime-murder-rate-us-high-2022/>.

Having bare access to necessities, the homeless often have no choice but to resort to petty crimes to support themselves and their families. As echoed by the Strain theory, “homeless individuals may commit crime because they are angry and frustrated at their situations and the discrimination they experience that inhibits their abilities to improve their lives”². Yes, on paper it may be easy to label the homeless population as responsible for harmful crimes, but this is far from the truth. In fact, the two most common crimes by the homeless are shoplifting and drug possession, harmless acts usually committed for necessity. And even more minor than that, many homeless are convicted for behaviors that they cannot even help. This includes common activities like loitering, trespassing, and vagrancy which are irrationally labeled as criminal behavior by the justice system³.

Not only this, but many homeless struggle with debilitating mental illnesses and drug addiction. Findings from the Urban Institute on Health and Reentry show that a whopping 30-40% of the homeless are reported to have a chronic mental or physical disability, and that doesn’t even take into account the percentage of homeless people with minor illnesses⁴. Of course, many of their diagnosed conditions could easily be treated in the right circumstances, but the homeless have little to no support. Left alone on the streets, they often only have access to low-quality care, ultimately lacking the self-sufficiency to treat their disorders and addictions. This significantly spikes the size of the homeless population, perpetuating the cycle of crimes committed out of desperation for necessities.

One may argue that there are countless housing systems to help the homeless avoid petty crimes and treat their disorders. However, the “criminal” offenses committed by a significant portion of the homeless population prevent them from having access to this support due to their incarceration. Research from the Urban Institute of Employment and Reentry illustrates that only a mere one in five surveyed obtained a job after their release, despite nearly all respondents expressing that they wanted a job⁴. This is due to the criminal record they must carry with them after being charged with any type of offense. No matter how petty, this stigmatized label will significantly decrease the chances that a homeless person can find employment. Kathleen Bolter from the Uptown Institute for Employment Research affirms this fact, claiming how “individuals with even a misdemeanor arrest are less likely to be hired than those without a criminal offense”⁵. Further, the lack of resources among the homeless is another limiting factor preventing employment. In a study conducted by the Opportunity to Succeed Program (OPTS), nearly half of the surveyed homeless reported to have difficulties accessing

² Mustaine, E. E. (2015). Homelessness and crime. *The encyclopedia of crime and punishment*, 1-5. John Wiley & Sons: New York: DOI:10.1002/9781118519639.wbecpx282.

³ Vankin, J. (2022, June 17). *Homelessness and crime: California’s hot-button political issues are even more complex than you think*. California Local. <https://californialocal.com/localnews/statewide/ca/article/show/6215-homelessness-crime-california/#:~:text=The%20percentages%20have%20stayed%20roughly,violent%20crime%2C%20nor%20property%20crime.>

⁴ Baer, D. (n.d.). Understanding the challenges of prisoner reentry - urban institute. <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/42981/411289-Understanding-the-Challenges-of-Prisoner-Reentry.PDF>.

⁵ Bolter, K. (n.d.). *Job training programs as crime reduction strategy? how training people for good jobs can lead to fewer arrests*. Upjohn Institute. <https://www.upjohn.org/research-highlights/job-training-programs-crime-reduction-strategy-how-training-people-good-jobs-can-lead-fewer-arrests#:~:text=Having%20an%20arrest%20record%20can,been%20arrested%20at%20least%20once.>

public transportation for work⁵. Without proper access to transportation, it's an essentially impossible task for a homeless person to land a job, let alone find secure housing.

However, this employment to homelessness problem is more complex than you may think. Not only does homelessness create difficulties to employment, but recent surges in unemployment are also causing homelessness to spread. The National Coalition for the Homeless reports over six million lost jobs from 2007-2009, as well as a dramatically slowed wage growth, dropping from an annual 3.9% increase to a 1.3% increase⁶. After being laid off from a job that already pays a bare minimum wage, and with prices for even the most minimal forms of housing rising, the simple task of economic stability is becoming more like a pipe dream for tens of thousands of Americans.

II. The Policies Enabling The Cycle

But this phenomenon doesn't happen randomly. In fact, it is the enforcement of twisted government policies that perpetuate a cycle of rash criminal accusations and endless jail time. Many cities in America criminalize homelessness, punishing their everyday behavior. The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition found that "homeless men made up 40% of all arrests for non-violent crimes, [being] five times more likely than the general population to be arrested"⁷. Whether it be loitering, begging, or lying down in public, behaviors that can't be helped given the resource-lacking situations of the homeless are seen as worthy of time in prison. Despite how unfair these accusations are, the homeless don't even have the option to legally fight their way through jail time. The coalition showed that "after arrest, homeless people are less likely to appear in court or pay fines connected to their arrest"⁷. Having tents as houses, it's obvious that many homeless people would not be able to hire a lawyer and fight in court, causing them to reluctantly accept their punishment as criminals.

It only takes one time in prison to have your life thrown off-rail, too. Even the most minor conviction histories can leave a large blemish on one's reputation, making it extremely difficult to find employment, and thus being that much more likely to end up homeless. A report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics finds that "of more than 50,000 people released from federal prisons in 2010, a staggering 33% found no employment at all over four years post-release, and at any given time, no more than 40% of the cohort was employed"⁸. Even for those who were able to find employment, there were only an average of 3.4 jobs out of the studied sample above, implying that the jobs had no security or stability⁸. And to make the situation even worse, it's uncommon for a criminal to only commit one single crime in their lifetime. This phenomenon is known as Recidivism, where a convicted criminal tends to become involved in more crime after being put in jail once. For instance, studies from the Council on Criminal Justice reveal that in 2012, rearrest rates for those formerly incarcerated were at a staggering 71%⁹. But this process

⁶ Employment and homelessness - national coalition for the homeless. (n.d.). <https://www.nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/Employment.pdf>.

⁷ Stephens, R. K. (2021, May 3). *Homelessness after reentry leads to higher recidivism rates*. Interrogating Justice. <https://interrogatingjustice.org/challenges-after-release/homelessness-after-reentry-leads-to-higher-recidivism-rates/>

⁸ Wang, L., & Bertram, W. (2022). *New Data on formerly Incarcerated People's employment reveal labor market injustices*. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/blog/2022/02/08/employment/>

⁹ La Vigne, N., & Lopez, E. (2021, October 7). *Recidivism rates: What you need to know*. Council on Criminal Justice. https://counciloncj.org/recidivism_report/

doesn't happen for no reason. It is the strict policies that label non-harmful activities as crimes, as well as the lack of aid from social services, that drive those convicted to continue serving jail time. With how petty their offenses are, it's often unlikely for these criminals to serve significant time in jail. However, it is likely for these people to end up stranded on the streets after they are released. In fact, studies conducted by the National Low Income Housing Coalition find that "formerly incarcerated people are almost 10 times more likely to be homeless than the general population"¹⁰. Because of the shame and miniscule support people receive when coming out of prison, one small mistake could deny them opportunities to recover through employment or housing. This can easily cause one to remain unemployed and eventually fall into unescapable poverty.

It seems plausible that good-hearted citizens could help, but research indicates that is not the case. Outreach programs created by everyday people need to be legally recognized in order to get off the ground. For example, community-based programs attempting to nourish the homeless need written permission from their respective city government, in the form of a food handler's permit. This hurdle alone makes it extremely difficult for the vast majority of people to even get started with their projects. The resources people need to access their city government, as well as the inevitable mountain of paperwork, would naturally deter many who simply wanted to start a small-scale act for their community. On top of that, a majority of these programs are only allowed to feed the homeless four times a year, as well as being forced to space 500 feet away from each other and residential properties¹¹. The reason for this heap of restrictions is simple. Many cities have simply decided to prioritize "economic development and tourism, they've decided that food sharing programs — especially those that happen in public spaces and draw dozens, if not hundreds of people — are problematic"¹¹. But it isn't just the city government that is preventing the opening of charity groups. In wealthier areas, a coalition known as NIMBYism, or "not in my backyard" politics, will actively fight against support groups for the homeless, in fear that their homes will be dirtied by the presence of a poorer group of people. Miriam Axel-Lute voices this statement, noting how the main qualms influencing NIMBYism include "increased crime, lowered property values, and quality of life"¹². With entire communities in support of this ideology, those convicted of crime and in poverty find themselves with no support to turn to. Ultimately, this creates a society like the one we see now, with two demographics separated by wealth and only further dividing.

But there is some argument to be made against the large-scale enforcement of food security programs. Robert Marlut, a consultant who works against the presence of homelessness in cities/counties, believes that "food sharing programs should only be located near what he calls the 'core areas of recovery': mental health, substance abuse and job readiness services"¹¹. He claims that providing the homeless with food security can prevent those from actually accessing recovery programs, since it'll only act as a false sense of security from their plights. While food security may keep people physiologically nourished, it certainly

¹⁰ Couloute, L. (2018, August 20). *Formerly incarcerated people are nearly 10 times more likely to be homeless*. National Low Income Housing Coalition.

<https://nlihc.org/resource/formerly-incarcerated-people-are-nearly-10-times-more-likely-be-homeless>

¹¹ Barclay, E. (2014, October 22). *More cities are making it illegal to hand out food to the homeless*. NPR.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2014/10/22/357846415/more-cities-are-making-it-illegal-to-hand-out-food-to-the-homeless>

¹² Axel-Lute, M. (2022, June 24). *What is NIMBYism and how do affordable housing developers respond to it?*. Shelterforce.

<https://shelterforce.org/2021/11/17/what-is-nimbyism-and-how-do-affordable-housing-developers-respond-to-it/>

won't be enough to help anyone escape homelessness and enter back into society. Of course, this does hold some truth; purely relying on food security would inevitably lead to perpetual homelessness. But this detaches from the conversation of the overbearingly tight restrictions placed on these programs. With how many barriers put on food charity, it seems that cities hold less of an intention on prioritizing the development of other recovery programs, and more so on prioritizing the cleanliness of their community. And it isn't just a couple cities doing this. The National Coalition for the Homeless recently released a report, stating that in the past four years, there has been a drastic 47% increase in cities, including Los Angeles, Phoenix, and Miami, that have enforced restrictions on food sharing¹¹. It's logical for our communities to prioritize other recovery programs to get the homeless off their feet, such as housing and employment. But without some space for food security programs to breathe, the homeless will be forced to worry about which meal they'll have to skip instead of improving their future.

Furthermore, there are also several legal loopholes local governments will slip through to criminalize homelessness. A report conducted by the National Homeless Law Center found that from 2006-2019, there was a staggering 92% increase in bans on street camping, a 103% increase in bans on public loitering, and a 213% increase in bans on living in a vehicle nationwide¹³. To emphasize the barrier to social aid even further, those without stable addresses are barred from business, medical, and social services, which would include aspects of stability like tax forms and paychecks. Because of this lack of access, the homeless can be legally denied employment and healthcare, opportunities absolutely necessary to rise out of their situations. For instance, studies conducted by the University of Birmingham revealed that in an interview, homeless people reported that they were discharged from hospitals without primary care and were denied access to mental health and substance use support¹⁴. As illustrated, it's not that the homeless don't want to spend the effort rising out of poverty, but rather, our society is making that goal unachievable. With such a rapid increase in city living restrictions, the homeless essentially have nowhere to turn due to the massive barriers cities place on non-irritable and necessary activities. And no way to turn to any recovery program, since unreasonable city policy restrictions make it near impossible for any to even open.

In fact, there is one specific governmental practice that perfectly exemplifies the twisted nature of policies that perpetuate homelessness and crime. The prison-industrial complex describes the interaction between government and private prisons. In the case of these private corporations, the more prisoners that are held in their facility, the more government funds they receive to support those prisoners. At a glance, this system seems normal, but it's how the private prisons abuse this system that reveal its horrifying consequences. Because profit can be maximized by housing more inmates, "they work with the goal of keeping as many inmates incarcerated for as long as possible" rather than prioritizing their reentry into society¹⁵. This can be extremely problematic for many homeless people who have resorted to crime, as extended sentences can impair possibilities for future employment, as well as reintegration into one's community as a normal citizen.

¹³ Justice, V. I. of. (2022, October 12). *Forbes EQ Brandvoice: How the U.S. criminalizes homelessness*. Forbes. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeseq/2022/01/01/how-the-us-criminalizes-homelessness/?sh=21c364544869>

¹⁴ University of Birmingham. (2019, July 16). *Homeless people are denied basic health care, research finds*. Phys.org. <https://phys.org/news/2019-07-homeless-people-denied-basic-health.html>

¹⁵ Potter, M. (2020, October 12). *What is the prison industrial complex?*. JEP. <https://www.justiceeducationproject.org/post/what-is-the-prison-industrial-complex>

To maximize benefit, these prisons will also exploit prisoners for labor and make their quality of life as “cost-effective” as possible. Studies by Darius Rafieyan, a senior reporter on private capital and business, estimated “that there were nearly 1.5 million incarcerated people working, and that included 600,000 people in the manufacturing sector”¹⁵. This forced labor is an abuse of the 13th amendment, as prisons use the inferior status of their inmates as an excuse for “free labor”. Naturally, this accelerates the economic production of the prisons, since hired labor would no longer be a cut into their profit. But at the same time, this inhumane practice is a cut into the promised moral obligations of a public service. Prisons are meant to prioritize the betterment of the common people’s lives. But instead, a majority of inmates who have likely been thrown into jail for petty crimes are being exploited as human tools, with “safety precautions [being] overlooked” and their quality of life being dramatically lowered in order to save funds.

The racial disparities linked to the prison-industrial complex shouldn’t be overlooked as well. As a way of exerting racial control, our society abuses the criminal justice system to target communities of color. The book, “The New Jim Crow”, written by Michelle Alexander, reflects on this point, stating that despite the colorblindness that the criminal justice system preaches, the title of felon makes forms of discrimination legal, such as being incarcerated for petty acts¹⁶. Through this lens, the racial prejudice inherent in our criminal justice system can be seen as a continuation of Jim Crow Laws. Through examples like the War on Drugs, black communities have been repeatedly targeted in nationwide efforts to reduce crime, drug abuse, and other illegal activities. Of course, open racism in policy is no longer permissible as it was during the Jim Crow Era, but it has only been “redesigned” by our justice policies, using one’s race as justification for discrimination.

III. Solutions To Break The Cycle

But despite the several injustices that lie within government policy, there are also a considerable amount of potential solutions that can halt homelessness. Naturally, many policymakers in favor of solving the issue of homelessness have suggested a greater access to employment for everyone. While a lack of necessities may limit one’s ability to rise out of a poor standard of living, the inherent reason for this inability is a lack of stable income. Especially if tarnished with a history of crime, the poor have an extremely hard time finding a job, let alone a stable, well-paying one. Regardless of the crime or whether or not they have changed for the better, this label unapologetically stigmatizes these individuals as being incompetent and untrustworthy. As a result, successful employment into a respectable occupation is near impossible for the homeless faced with this predicament. But it isn’t unfixable either. By making the pathway to employment accessible for the homeless, securing stability will be a far easier task than the status quo. It could be as easy as offering training for open sectors of employment, whether it be labor, facility management, or more. Naturally, these jobs wouldn’t be so sophisticated as to need an extensive educational background, but those jobs also aren’t necessary to rise out of homelessness. Instead, all that is needed is a stable job that can pay well enough to properly support oneself and their family. By providing the homeless with the

¹⁶ Alexander, M. (n.d.). *The New Jim Crow: About*. The New Jim Crow. <https://newjimcrow.com/about>

necessary skill set and options for their success, we could take a large stride forward in breaking the loop of crime and poverty.

Another promising strategy that has recently garnered significant public buzz is UBI, or Universal Basic Income. Brought to the spotlight by Andrew Yang, UBI is a program in which every adult citizen will receive a certain amount of income on a regular basis, with proposed prices ranging around \$1000. While the amount isn't too noteworthy, the goal of the program is not to magically boost any citizen into a decent economic status. But rather, by providing everyone with a secure safety net, securing necessities will become far easier of a task. For example, certain cities have already begun to implement smaller-scale versions of UBI, such as "Los Angeles, [which] began allocating \$1,000 per month to some of its poorest residents in January 2022"¹⁷. Results from these cash transfer programs have reported a substantial decrease in "homicide, assault, property crime, overdose deaths, and intimate partner violence"¹⁷. With this in place, robberies would dramatically decrease in occurrence, since crime would essentially be unnecessary as a last resort to stabilize. Studies on the effects of basic income programs show that, "because cash transfers reduce poverty, financial need, and inequality, they decrease the perceived benefits of crime and increase its felt costs to others and oneself, fostering reductions in crime and increased experiences of shared community"¹⁷. Instead, lower income citizens would have a better chance to find employment than ever before, now focusing their attention on rising up in society rather than being burdened with the constant need for stability. UBI is an automatic way to move past the difficulties of stabilizing, simultaneously closing the gap between the poor and the rich by starting everyone on a more equal playing field. If given this chance, crime and arrests are bound to drop thanks to the multitude of opportunities now open to the homeless.

Another popular proposition is the Housing First Approach, which is a policy that essentially offers free, immediate, and permanent housing to those in need of it within the boundaries of a community. Rather than tackling the income-based weaknesses that employment covers, the Housing First Approach attempts to solve the widespread lack of shelter. Often, people will turn to crime because of the severe lack of resources they have. With no other option dealt to them, petty crime turns from a last resort to a necessity to provide for themselves and their families. However, the Housing First Approach can solve this issue. Studies have shown that "Housing First programs reduce interactions with services like hospitals, jails, or shelter, which also result in measurable cost savings for communities"¹⁸. Being arguably the most important and challenging to obtain, the necessity of permanent housing is simply given to the poor without any secondary conditions or requirements. Thus, the expenses and difficulties that usually come with finding housing can be tossed aside, instead allowing these individuals to devote their effort towards acquiring ample necessities, employment, and other resources that can lead to a more stable lifestyle. In addition, the Housing First Approach does offer individual support on top of the housing that it provides. For example, "rapid re-housing provides services and resources customized to the specific needs of each individual or family, which can include rental assistance, housing navigation services, and case

¹⁷ Hoefer, L. (2022, March 8). *How basic income prevents violence*. Basic Income Today. <https://basicincometoday.com/how-basic-income-prevents-violence/#:~:text=Because%20cash%20transfers%20reduce%20poverty,increased%20experiences%20of%20shared%20community>

¹⁸ Ranney, K. (2023, June 22). *What is housing first?*. Community Solutions. https://community.solutions/what-is-housing-first/?gclid=CjwKCAjw4ZWkBhA4EiwAVJXwqUFdTtsQhvOLOjWyc3VWPNUrbdjf0HAI1M9NSEMA37UPutOLmjUoGRoCn4wQAvD_BwE

management”¹⁸. Being integrated into a community with others who share a similar plight to their own, the Housing First Approach fosters a culture of familiarity and like-mindedness. With individual support geared towards recovery, this system offers one the opportunity to take one step forward in escaping poverty. Of course, there’s only so much that free shelter can do, and it certainly leaves a large portion of one’s potential success into their own hands. However, this self-choice is extremely important when factoring in one’s motivation to climb the social ladder. As stated by a research article researching the Housing First Approach, “housing success is generally dependent on individuals’ willingness to access programs”¹⁹. If handed everything on a silver platter, one’s drive to rise out of poverty would plummet as a result. Without the autonomy that the Housing First Approach provides, it could actually detriment one’s ultimate success in finding stability.

Moreover, released criminals are often unfairly thrown into a world with which they have little familiarity. This reintegration into society can prove to be extremely challenging, especially if already lacking in resources before incarceration. Thus, correctional education programs have shown significant success in reintegration. Research from the Rand Corporation, a nonprofit agency aiming to reform public policy, reported that correctional education programs decreased the chance for former inmates to return to crime by 43%²⁰. On top of this, the same study concluded that one’s chances of finding employment increased along with a reduced rate of crime. Some might say that a base level of education wouldn’t help in the real world, but this isn’t the case. Correctional education programs instruct practical knowledge and skills needed to self-sustain in society, such as financial education. Knowing “how to budget, improve credit and save for retirement” are vital skills needed to build financial stability and re-enter society”²⁰.

Conclusion

With this messy web of complications, contradictions, and obstacles, it’s apparent that untangling the cycle of homelessness and crime is no easy feat. Even with billions of dollars invested into ending poverty, the problem has only remained stagnant. But this isn’t to say that the cycle can’t be broken; we’re only approaching it in a faulty manner. For one, it’s no mystery for why so many individuals remain in a pattern of homelessness and crime. Rather, there are a multitude of policies and stigmas we have set in place, silently but strongly oppressing these individuals. And not only this, but the sums of money we have poured into societal-wide reform have only gone to waste. For example, we have instituted countless shelters to temporarily house the homeless. While it is a valuable first step to devote so much money and attention towards reform, without putting a permanent roof over their heads, that mountain of cash may as well be emptied into a drain instead.

Quite simply, we are approaching the problem from the wrong angle. But we already have the answer. We have created multiple effective solutions to breaking this oppression; we just

¹⁹ Woodhall-Melnik, J. R., & Dunn, J. R. (2016). A systematic review of outcomes associated with participation in Housing First programs. *Housing Studies*, 31(3), 287-304.

²⁰ First Step Alliance. (2021, July 15). *Reducing recidivism: Creating a path to successful reentry*. First Step Alliance.

https://www.firststepalliance.org/post/reducing-recidivism?gad=1&gclid=CjwKCAjwhdWkBhBZEiwA1ibLmNcrMxtxWue0aN79I56OTOjMvwRSGOvB2Exna08IUQcZDKY9h7zd6BoCH9gQAvD_BwE



haven't put any into full action. However, this can change. Ambitious ideas have already borne fruit in localized areas, such as the guaranteed financial security of UBI and the permanent safety in shelter through the Housing First Approach. Of course, these projects have limitations of their own, but the status quo is certainly no better. By directing our attention towards different pathways, we may give ourselves a chance to halt homelessness and prevent crime increasingly. Solely, it is up to us whether or not we want to make that choice.

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