

December 2021 #21-35

Summary:

False assumptions about the root causes of homelessness are driving bad public policy on the West Coast. It's time to recognize that homelessness is not being caused by a lack of affordable housing, but rather by a substance abuse crisis that must be dealt with firmly.

Word Count: 815

“It’s time to bust the myth that most of the region’s homeless are victims of rising housing prices.”

Homelessness: Outdated Theories Lead to Doomed Policies

By Eric Fruits, Ph.D.

What if everything we thought we knew about homelessness was wrong? If that’s the case, many of the policies we’re pursuing are making things worse instead of better. It’s becoming clearer that much of the accepted wisdom regarding homelessness may be nothing more than convenient myths—myths that lead to doomed policies.

The Oregon Office of Economic Analysis [claims](#) “we know homelessness is primarily about the inability to afford housing, largely the result of not building enough housing in recent decades.” Multnomah County also blames the “affordability crisis” but [credits](#) racism as a “structural” cause of homelessness.

Under this theory, the homeless on the streets are locals who couldn’t afford their rents or were unable to find housing because of systemic racism and racist property owners. It’s asserted that homelessness leads to substance abuse, rather than the other way around. If this is true, the solution is straightforward. Build more taxpayer-funded affordable housing, give priority to BIPOC applicants, and root out racist landlords. Give people housing and opportunities for treatment, and the substance abuse will go away.

But what if the theory is wrong?

Portland’s unsheltered homeless population is overwhelmingly white (68%), male (69%), and working age (73%), according to the latest [survey](#)—which was conducted nearly three years ago. That was pre-COVID, when the economy was booming and working-age unemployment was at a 20-year low of about 3%. If a white, working age man wanted a job to pay the rent, he could have found a job to pay the rent. Something is wrong with this picture.

What’s wrong is what’s missing. The last survey reports nearly half of the unsheltered homeless suffer from substance abuse. That share is likely higher today. According to the Oregon Health Authority, overdose [deaths](#) in Multnomah County from fentanyl and methamphetamine began to skyrocket around 2017. From 2016 to 2019, deaths from meth increased 86% and fentanyl deaths tripled. Last year, 126 people with “domicile unknown” [died](#) in Multnomah County. Substance use was involved in nearly two-thirds of those deaths.

Instead of a homelessness crisis that’s leading to substance abuse, we have a substance abuse crisis that’s driving homelessness.



In “[The Least of Us](#),” Sam Quinones recounts the story of Eric, a social worker in Los Angeles. Of all the people he’d met in L.A.’s homeless camps, Eric could not remember a single one who lost their housing because of high rents. Instead, they told him meth was the main reason they were homeless. Even so, according to Quinones, “[p]olicymakers and advocates instead preferred to focus on L.A.’s cost of housing, which was very high, but hardly relevant to people rendered schizophrenic and unhousable by methamphetamine.”

Michael Shellenberger’s “[San Fransicko: Why Progressives Ruin Cities](#)” concludes progressive policymakers and advocates have adopted an ideology that sees lawbreakers as victims. Under this way of thinking, any attempts to rein in lawbreaking will further victimize the lawbreakers. The result is paralysis and an urge to spend money to give the impression of solving a problem without doing anything to actually solve the problem.

On homelessness, San Francisco’s leaders have decided that expensive publicly funded permanent supportive housing—rather than emergency shelter—is the best way to address the problem. This is the same thinking that dominates Metro, Multnomah County, and the City of Portland’s policies. Under what is known as a “housing first” approach, residents are under no obligation to seek treatment for substance abuse or mental illness. The hope is after they are housed, someday eventually they’ll come around to getting help, but only when they’re ready.

It’s a policy that’s doomed to fail. It’s well known in the recovery field that the people who are most in need of treatment are also those who are most resistant to treatment. Handing addicts the keys to an apartment that cost more than \$300,000 to build and saying, “Let us know when you’re ready for rehab,” is a recipe for failure. Most of them will never be ready.

Shellenberger and Quinones write that the meth on the streets today is different from just a few years ago. This new formulation creates psychosis and schizophrenia and causes users to commit crimes and violence. Shellenberger argues that drug users arrested for committing crimes should be given a choice of rehab or jail. It’s a form of tough love that may save their lives while protecting the community.

It’s been 16 years since Portland and Multnomah County adopted a 10-year plan to end homelessness, and we’re now in our seventh year of a city-wide housing emergency. Even so, the problem is worse today than it was then. Something isn’t working. It’s time to bust the myth that most of the region’s homeless are victims of rising housing prices. It’s time to address the real problem—a substance abuse crisis that’s driving people into homelessness and turning residents and businesses into victims of crime and violence.

Eric Fruits, Ph.D. is Vice President of Research at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon’s free market public policy research organization, which recently published “[Homelessness in Portland: Some Straightforward Solutions to a Complex Problem](#).” A version of this article was published by [the Pamplin Media Group](#) on December 17, 2021.

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