

Homeless





Photo by EV

I have been immersed in the effort to end homelessness here in Los Angeles for some time now. This all started back in 2017 when I was appointed by Mayor Garcetti to serve on the Citizens Oversight Committee for the \$1.2B HHH Bond Measure for homeless housing production. At the time, I thought I knew something about homelessness and how this city works. Was I wrong!

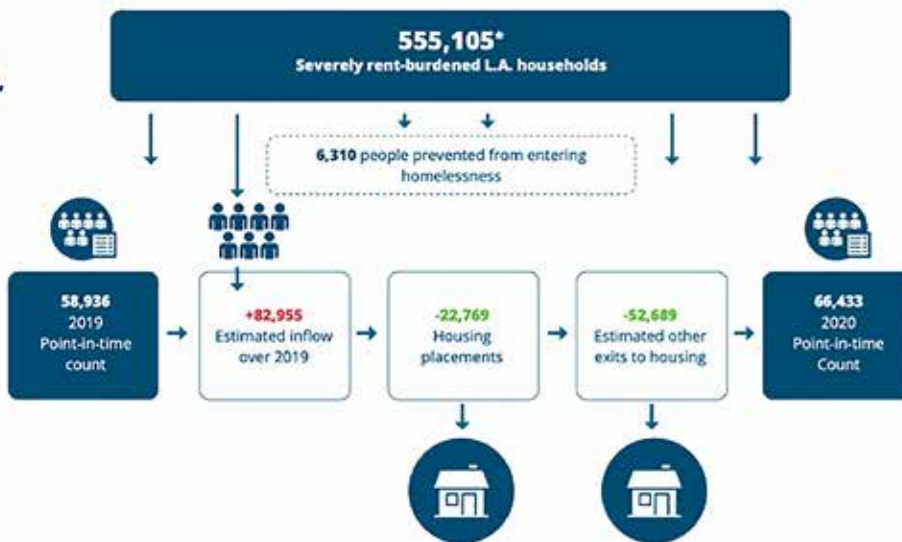
Homelessness is one of the most talked about but least understood issues of our day. This is a function of both the complexity of the problem and the general civic apathy that plagues our entire society. What's interesting about homelessness is that it seems like we actually care about the issue and are trying to do something to help. Here in Los Angeles, we passed the HHH Bond to try to build 10,000 units of permanent supportive housing. We passed Measure H at the County level to provide \$300M a year in for homeless services. Our Mayor has allocated unprecedented amounts of discretionary city funds to the problem and launched programs like A Bridge Home program to create interim shelter facilities around the city and a growing army of homeless outreach workers and volunteers.

But what we're doing is not working and is clearly not enough.

*What would
it take for you
to become
homeless?*

Inflow has Increased in 2020

L.A. housed **more people than ever**, yet our housing affordability crisis drove a net rise in homelessness.



The numbers here are staggering. It is estimated that 82,955 people fell into homelessness last year! If this is true, it's really an incredible statistic. I cannot believe this doesn't get more press coverage. Think down at the level of the individual or family. What does this say about how people are living? How can so many be living right up to the edge of survival like that? What does that say about our society and our system?

The story is not all gloom and doom. There's a positive side of the story. Of these 82,955 people, LAHSA directly helps 22,769. This help comes in the form of a rental voucher, a subsidized interim living situation, or placement directly into permanent subsidized housing. This, in and of itself, is an incredible feat and a direct result of the good efforts I mentioned above. Think what the city would look like if we hadn't done the things we've done...

Interestingly, LAHSA then estimates that 52,689 of these cases are resolved by "Other Exits to Housing." What this means is that they "self-resolve." Essentially what's happening here is that people find another place to live, either on their own or with a family or friend. They get back on their feet somehow. I think what this statistic really speaks to is that many people have adequate social safety nets. They have a place to turn, access to resources or some avenue to prevent them from ending up homeless.

Then there are the 7,497 unlucky souls who don't. These are the people without the social safety net. These are the people who literally have nowhere to turn.

The topic of homelessness comes up a lot in my life as people know that I'm publicly involved in the effort. What's interesting about these conversations is that most people are so disconnected they have a hard time understanding how one could become homeless. They live a life that is just so far removed from the edge of survival, they cannot see what's going on here. As a result, there's a tendency for people to assume the worst—that this is all a consequence of addiction and mental health problems. And to be sure, there is some truth there. One of the questions that I always come back to in these conversations though is this:

What would it take for you to become homeless?

I challenge people to really think this through in specific detail and to think about all the people they know and all the resources they have at their disposal. Invariably, the prospect is so remote that people literally cannot fathom a series of events bad enough to put them on the streets.

The truth here is this: we have only a loose understanding of the problem. We know in broad terms the situations in life that might cause someone to become homeless. We know that there are people on the streets who have made bad choices and are struggling with addiction or are suffering from mental health issues. We know that there are people fleeing from domestic violence. We know that there are people who are struggling to make ends meet financially and end up on the street after losing a job or suffering some other unexpected financial setback. We know that there

are emancipated foster youth who never have a chance in the world, struggling veterans, members of the LGBTQ community turned out of their homes...

With all this though, we just don't know what's really going-on at the individual level. There's a principle in the law that might help us here. In trying to determine liability in a negligence case, for example, there is a legal distinction between different kinds of causation. There's the cause-in-fact—i.e. one car hitting another—and then there's the legal cause—i.e. one of the driver's was intoxicated. When determining liability in a case, what's important is the legal cause. What's going-on here with homelessness is that we have a decent understanding of the cause-in-fact. Essentially, but for some financial stress that prevents an individual from paying for shelter, he/she does not become homeless. This is the fundamental basis of LAHSA's whole framework and why the graphic on page 11 starts with the 555,105 "Severely Rent Burdened Households." But we don't have a clear understanding of the legal cause—the things that are really causing individuals to end up on the streets.

It's just not as simple as the dominant policy narrative would suggest. "Rents are too high, so more people are ending-up on the streets." This misses a whole bunch of critical steps

on the way. I get it—higher rents increase the probability of people getting evicted. But that's not the whole story here. No way. There is a very long chain of events between missing a rent payment and becoming homeless.

From a policy perspective, I think our fundamental problem is that we aren't spending enough time understanding just how it is that an individual ends up on the street. All our efforts are aimed at treating the visible symptom of the problem—to get people off the streets and into housing. (A very laudable goal, by the way). But what we should really be focused on is preventing homelessness in the first place. To do that we have to get into the chain-of-events and try to understand what's happening from the first moment of financial stress to the moment when someone steps out onto the street without a place to turn.

My hypothesis is that the homelessness crisis is a powerful sign that there is something fundamentally wrong with the structure of our society. I think that what's going-on here is that some large percentage of our population lives without the protection of an adequate family or social safety net. For this is how you actually (the legal cause) end up on the street. When you have nowhere to turn.

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