



# Harvard Model Congress Boston 2024

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## THE HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

*By Emily Peck*

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### INTRODUCTION

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*A row of tents  
homeless people are  
living in under a  
bridge*

*Urban Wire*

*“In 2023, there  
were more than  
582,462 people  
experiencing  
homelessness in the  
U.S.”*

As of 2023, there are more than 582,462 people experiencing homelessness in the United States (Curls, 2023). Many of those people suffer from substance abuse and untreated mental health disorders that only worsen with a lack of access to proper housing and care. Research has shown that experiencing homelessness increases the likelihood of an individual committing nonviolent crime, like petty theft of food or clothing, often referred to as “crimes of poverty” (Fischer et al., 2008).

Homelessness is an urgent social issue — homeless individuals suffer negative health and economic consequences the longer they spend in unstable conditions.

While the need to address the issue of homelessness is clear, the solutions to the issue are not. Often those experiencing homelessness have difficulty finding work and working around expensive housing prices, particularly if they struggle with persistent mental health or substance abuse issues. As such, homelessness is a social issue with many deeply rooted socio-economic causes, making finding solutions complicated and difficult.

Decreasing homelessness is further complicated by the perception many people have of the homeless population. There is often a belief that homeless people do not want to work or are too mentally or physically disabled to be of any use to society. This perception also misses a key component of the issue, as it tends to ignore homeless populations that have been unexpectedly and suddenly displaced, for example, due to natural disasters. These negative perceptions of the homeless population also prevent communities from investing resources in their homeless population. There are also those who believe the only way to address the issue of

homelessness is through the criminal prosecution of homeless people.

## EXPLANATION OF THE ISSUE

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### *Historical Development*

Homelessness in the United States is a prevalent concern throughout the country today, but it has only existed in its current form since after World War 2. In fact, homelessness rose to its current scale in the 1980s.

#### 1800s: The Era of the Hobo

Before the 1900s, homeless people travelling around the U.S. without a stable job were often referred to as “hobos” (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018). Increased urbanization and industrialization in the 1870s led to a boom in the United States homeless population, as more people began riding national railroads in search of work (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018). Public perception was generally negative towards “hobos” in the 1800s: their joblessness was often perceived as resulting from laziness or bad character (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018).

#### 1940s: Post-WW2 Veteran Homelessness

After World War 2, the population of homeless people grew in the U.S. as veterans struggled to reintegrate into society (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018). Their difficulties stemmed from physical and mental post-war injuries and the logistical struggles of reintegration, such as finding housing and jobs (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018). Homeless veterans in modern times continue to contend with many of these same problems.

#### 1960s: Deinstitutionalization of Asylum Patients

The next substantial increase in the homeless population began with the **deinstitutionalization** of the mentally ill population nationally in the 1960s because of a movement against harsh conditions in asylums (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018). Many patients had nowhere to go after the closure of their institution, and insufficient public resources left many on the street, which only exacerbated their mental health issues.

#### 1980s: Social Services Failures

The 1960’s marked the advent of modern homelessness. Many note the 1980s as the decade in which many of the social issues causing contemporary homelessness were solidified. In the 1980s, the homeless population boomed because of “gentrification of the inner city, deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, high



*Sign of a homeless veteran*

*Jewish War Veterans*

**deinstitutionalization** – the process of transferring mentally ill patients from inpatient psychiatric hospitals to less intensive forms of treatment to reduce costs.

**Chronic homelessness** – being homeless for more than 12 months, often leads to mental health and substance abuse issues, as well as increased difficulty of finding stable housing.

**Episodic homelessness** – repeated but brief periods of homelessness

**Transient homelessness** – a single brief period of homelessness

**Affordable Housing Crisis** – “a shortage of single-family homeownership opportunities due to a low supply of homes and challenges facing first-time buyers” (Bailey, 2022)

unemployment rate, the emergence of HIV/AIDS, an inadequate supply of affordable housing options, and deep budget cuts to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and social service agencies in response to what was then the country’s worst recession since the Great Depression” (Jones, 2015). Homelessness in the U.S. has only grown as housing prices have continued to rise faster than income, and mental health services continue to fall short of need.

## *Scope of the Problem*

Homelessness is a social issue that is caused by a complicated array of factors, manifesting differently in different communities and among various populations. It is important to keep an all-encompassing definition of homelessness in mind when brainstorming solutions for the issue: homeless people are not just those living on the street, they are also families living in long term shelters and in temporary housing from housing authorities.

Some homeless people experience **chronic homelessness**, which is characterized as continuous homelessness for more than 12 months (Colburn, 2023). Those experiencing chronic homelessness often suffer from chronic mental or physical health conditions or prolonged substance abuse issues that make it highly difficult for them to find and maintain stable jobs. In each city in the U.S., 10-30% of the homeless population is categorized as chronically homeless (Colburn, 2023).

The remainder of the homeless population, on the other hand, experiences one of two differing types of homelessness: **episodic homelessness** – repeated but brief periods of homelessness – and **transient homelessness** – a single brief period of homelessness (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018). People experiencing episodic and transient homelessness are those for which a small change in housing prices and/or resources could pull them out of homelessness.

## The Affordable Housing Crisis

The homelessness crisis is fundamentally a crisis of a lack of housing, making affordability of housing a key causal factor of high homelessness rates. As housing prices have been rising faster than wages in the U.S. since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, homelessness has worsened (Colburn, 2023). When housing prices increase, those living on the edge of poverty can become unable to bear the extra costs of owning property and are pushed onto the street.

A high or increasing percentage of vacation rentals in a community can also worsen the **affordable housing crisis**, as landlords are incentivized to convert their properties to vacation rentals or charge higher rents with fewer houses in the rental market. Large areas with single-family zoning also worsen the affordable

housing crisis because they prevent the building of more units of housing. Fewer units of housing result in higher prices for units (Colburn, 2023).

According to a study by Gregg Colburn and Clayton Page Aldern at the Sightline Institute, the housing market in a city is the most important indicator of the size of the homeless population: “housing market conditions explain the most variation in rates of homelessness observed around the country. Cities with higher rents and lower rental-vacancy rates (i.e., tighter housing markets) see higher per capita rates of homelessness” (Colburn, 2023).

### Mental, Physical, and Substance Abuse Disorders

While the housing market is a key factor for determining the size of the homeless population, the availability of services to treat or support those with mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders can often determine the longevity of homelessness experienced in a community. There is a common perception that mental health and substance abuse issues cause homelessness, but “researchers have found that mental stability as it correlates to homelessness is a cycle rather than an effect” (Araj, 2023). Struggles with mental health and substance abuse often make it difficult for people to hold stable jobs and maintain substantial relationships, making such persons more likely to struggle with maintaining stable housing. However, studies have shown that living on the street also makes people more likely to develop mental health disorders and start using drugs.

The high population of homeless veterans can also be linked to issues with a lack of services for those with mental and physical disorders (Araj, 2023).

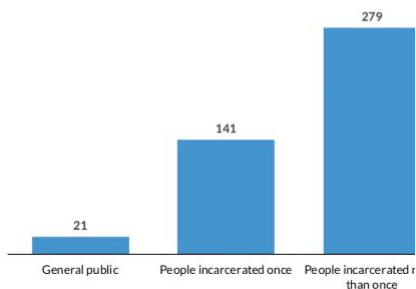
The high cost of health care in the U.S. and the social stigma surrounding seeking mental health treatment both lead to blocked access to necessary services and resources (“The State of Mental Health in America,” 2023). In fact, “Over half (54.7%) of adults with a mental illness do not receive treatment, totaling over 28 million individuals” (“The State of Mental Health in America,” 2023).

### Criminalization of Homelessness

The criminal justice system and homelessness crisis are deeply intertwined. In fact, being homeless greatly increases an individual’s chances of getting involved with the criminal justice system because “...being forced to live outside can lead to citations or arrests for low-level offenses like loitering or sleeping in parks. And people currently or previously involved in the justice system, who are often disconnected from supports and face housing and job discrimination, are more likely to experience homelessness” (“Five Charts,” 2020).

*“Researchers have found that mental stability as it correlates to homelessness is a cycle rather than an effect.”*

People Incarcerated More Than Once Are 13 Times More Likely to Experience Homelessness Than the General Public  
Number of people experiencing homelessness per 10,000 people in 2008



*People who have been incarcerated multiple times are far more likely to experience homelessness than people who have not (“Five Charts,” 2020)*

## Public Safety

Many see homeless people as more likely to commit crimes and think that high rates of homelessness are likely to cause high crime rates. A study by Marilyn Ee and Yan Zhang found that homelessness has led to higher rates of crime in Los Angeles, especially low-level property crime (Ee and Zhang, 2022). Ee and Zhang also found that homelessness contributes to “6% for crime against persons, 10% for crime against property, and 6% for crime against society” (Ee and Zhang, 2022).

## *Congressional Action*

**Section 8 voucher program** – an affordable housing program that provides vouchers to low-income families. The families then use the vouchers to pay their rent, allowing them to maintain safe and stable housing.

The first major bill to address the modern crisis of homelessness was the Housing and Urban Renewal Act of 1965. This act created rent supplements for low-income, disabled, and elderly people, and while it was incapable of completely offsetting the inflow of patients from recently closed mental health asylums, it helped to ease the impact for some people (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018). The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) was also created in 1965 to serve as the governing body in charge of dealing with the homelessness crisis.

Then, in 1974, the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 was passed, creating the Housing Choice Voucher Program, otherwise known as the **Section 8 program** (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018). Section 8 provides rental subsidies to individuals struggling to pay rent, providing means to pay their landlords. In 2015, more than 2.1 million households were supported by this program (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018).

Another important federal program to address the affordable housing crisis is the **Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)**, which was part of the 1986 Tax Reform Act (“What is the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit”). The LIHTC incentivizes developers to build low-income housing by reducing the income tax they owe. The federal government issues tax credits to state governments, and the governments then give the credits to developers through a competitive process (“What is the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit”).

**The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)** – a tax credit to housing developers that “subsidizes the acquisition, construction, and rehabilitation of affordable rental housing for low- and moderate-income tenants” (“What is the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit”).

In 2009, the McKinney-Vento Act, called the HEARTH Act, was signed into law (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018). The HEARTH Act created a federal goal to house all unhoused families within 30 days of experiencing homelessness and it streamlined the process through which communities could organize and apply to HUD for homeless assistance funding to organize services such as shelters or food donation programs (“The History of Homelessness,” 2018).

The most recent legislation addressing homelessness and corresponding issues is President Biden’s Build Back Better Act

which provides \$170 billion in housing investments, including funds for 300,000 new housing vouchers, to address the issue of homelessness in American communities (Fischer, 2022).

## *Other Policy Action*

The Department of Housing and Urban Development is the main federal agency that addressed the crisis. Under the Obama administration in 2010: a federal strategic plan to end homelessness was released by the department that specified specific goals to address the homelessness crisis.

In 2023, there was a wave of anti-homeless legislation on the state level. Missouri made it illegal for any person to sleep on state property, and offenders were made subject to up to \$750 in fines or up to 15 days in prison (Oladipo, 2023). Los Angeles banned homeless enactments within 500 feet of schools and daycares, Chicago ruled that all homeless shelters had to be moved for street cleaning during the winter, and New York banned homeless people from sleeping in subway cars (Oladipo, 2023).

In many cities, homelessness is one of the top concerns voiced by residents, so city officials have become incentivized to prosecute the homeless population instead of investing in a longer-term solution such as diverting resources to prevent. As such, federal legislators can fulfill the role of providing funding for prevention programs and building more affordable housing. That being said, specific housing policies, such as zoning laws, are often made on a more local level.



*Homeless man with his belongings in shopping carts on the streets of Los Angeles*

*Los Angeles Daily News*

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## IDEOLOGICAL VIEWPOINTS

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### *Conservative View*

Republicans often do not link the homelessness crisis and the affordable housing crisis. Their policy on the affordable housing crisis is to increase homeownership and decrease renting, to allow zoning decisions to be made locally, and to decrease government involvement in the housing market more broadly.

Those with conservative viewpoints on this issue are more likely to link causes of the homelessness crisis to mental health and substance abuse issues. As such, many conservatives support building more shelters with mental health and substance abuse recovery services to get homeless people off the streets.

Another widely supported policy among conservatives is increased enforcement of laws prohibiting unauthorized public camping and sleeping as a streamlined way to get people off the street. The main priority of conservative policies is often to get homeless people physically off the streets as quickly as possible.

## *Liberal View*

**Civil Commitment**  
–court-ordered  
institutionalization of  
a person suffering  
from mental illness or  
substance abuse  
issues. The  
institutionalization is  
usually ordered upon  
finding that the  
person is dangerous  
to themself or others.

Liberals often address the homelessness crisis by fighting the affordable housing crisis. As such, they are strong supporters of policies such as increasing Section 8 vouchers, expanding the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit, and ensuring marginalized groups are prioritized in receiving affordable housing (“Democratic Party and Republican Party”).

The traditional liberal approach to the high levels of mental health and substance abuse issues among homeless populations has been the prevention of crises through clean needle programs and increased resources funneled toward mental health services. These actions are considered in support of a humanizing approach towards homelessness, which is one that treats homeless people as humans who have the same rights as all other citizens. But liberal politicians across the country have increasingly been turning away from this approach. There has been a wave of democratic mayors increasingly using **civil commitments**, essentially putting homeless people into mental institutions or rehab programs for the good of the general population (Kaufman). Mayor Eric Adams of New York City and California Governor Gavin Newsom are leading this charge.

As such, opinions on how to address the mental health and substance abuse issues of the homeless population vary among different democratic politicians. If their constituency is largely based in an urban area, they are likely to favor a more immediate response to homelessness, such as civil commitments.

## AREAS OF DEBATE

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*Homeless shelter in  
Orange County,  
California*  
*Voice of Orange County*

Just as there are many social issues that cause homelessness to varying degrees, there are also many solutions at various levels of investment and intervention. Successful policy solutions will combine multiple solutions at multiple different levels. The propositions listed below are only a few of the many options for addressing the issue of homelessness, and delegates are encouraged to be creative and propose solutions beyond those listed below.

### *Expand Services for the Homeless Population*

One of the most frequently proposed ways to fix the homelessness crisis is to expand welfare services for homeless people. These services could include giving out food and clothing and building more homeless shelters. The services range in cost and effectiveness, with building more homeless shelters being a quick way to get people off the streets and providing food and clothing being a quick way to reduce suffering of the homeless population.

Arguments for adopting this solution are that it addresses the immediate needs of the homeless population and greatly reduces their immediate suffering. On the other hand, those against this policy claim it is expensive and does not address the root causes of homelessness.

## Political Perspectives on this Solution

Both conservatives and liberals favor this policy as getting homeless people off the street is politically popular. Liberals would be more likely to pair this policy with additional policies such as providing mental health services and legislating affordable housing policy to address the immediate and long-term needs of the homeless population.

### *Make Affordable Housing More Available Through Vouchers*

*“Housing vouchers allow renters to rent outside their price range by supplementing their rent with the voucher.”*

One way to help vulnerable populations acquire stable housing is through expanding housing voucher programs, such as the Section 8 voucher program. Housing vouchers allow renters to rent outside their price range by supplementing their rent with the voucher. Since the voucher is specifically for housing, renters can only use the program to ensure they live in stable housing. The program is also beneficial for landlords because they can provide housing to people who need it without personal cost.

Those in favor of this solution claim it helps quickly house the people who otherwise might end up living on the street or in homeless shelters. Opponents of this solution claim that it is expensive, as the voucher funds come directly from the federal government. They also claim that it does not solve the core issue of lack of supply of affordable housing.

## Political Perspectives on this Solution

Since this solution involves high levels of spending by the federal government, liberals are much more likely to support it than conservatives.

### *Build More Housing through Tax Credits and Changing Zoning Laws*

Another way to provide more affordable housing is to support affordable housing building projects. The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit is a federal program that provides funding to state and local governments so they can provide tax credits to developers building affordable housing. A barrier to building affordable housing is often that it is less profitable for developers — this solution effectively removes that barrier.



Another roadblock to building affordable housing is that cities and towns often have a lot of areas that are only zoned for single family homes, which prevents developers from building more affordable multi-family units in the same amount of space. By changing zoning laws to allow more multi-family units, lawmakers can make housing more affordable for their constituents.

Proponents of this solution argue that it gets at the root of the homelessness crisis, which is a lack of affordable housing. Opponents of this solution claim that the government is interfering too much with the housing market and that single family zoning creates more cohesive and uniform communities.

### Political Perspectives on this Solution

Because of the scale of government involvement in these solutions, liberals are much likely to favor these policy measures than conservatives. Conservatives also value the right of individual communities to make these types of decisions on their own, whereas liberals value a more involved approach.

*“The veteran population in the U.S. is highly vulnerable to homelessness, due to physical disability, mental disability, and unfavorable conditions when returning from service.”*

### *Prevent Homelessness Among Veterans*

The veteran population in the U.S. is highly vulnerable to homelessness, primarily due to physical and mental disabilities, as well as unfavorable living conditions when returning from service. As such, increasing veteran support services is one way to prevent veterans, specifically, from falling into homelessness. This can range from more mental health resources to increased assistance finding stable jobs and housing when they get back from their service.

Those in favor of adopting this solution argue that homelessness among veterans is a clear failure of public policy and of the government’s responsibility to its soldiers.

Opponents argue that by focusing on preventing the causes of homelessness, such as unaffordable housing, all people at risk, including veterans, will be less likely to become homeless.

### Political Perspectives on this Solution

Both liberals and conservatives are generally favorable toward policies that help the veteran population, with conservatives placing a slightly larger emphasis on such policies. Liberals would be more likely to push for more mental health services, and conservatives would likely favor vocational counseling support.

### *Increase Enforcement of Anti-Homelessness Laws*

This solution entails law enforcement agencies increasing arrests and fines for people sleeping or putting up tents in public areas. It can also manifest as building more anti-homeless infrastructure, like benches with armrests that make it hard to sleep on or leaning benches instead of sitting benches. Proponents of this solution argue

that anti-homeless infrastructure protects public safety and maintains the quality of city streets. Opponents argue that it is unnecessarily cruel to homeless people and does not address the root issues of their homelessness or alleviate problems faced by the homeless community.

## Political Perspectives on this Solution

Conservatives have been historically more likely to support increased enforcement policies, but liberal politicians in cities with high rates of homelessness are becoming increasingly amenable to such policies. As such, research into individual politicians' views is essential for this issue.

*“Over 60% of people who are chronically homeless have experienced lifetime mental health problems and over 80% have experienced lifetime alcohol and/or drug problems.”*

## *Expand Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services*

This solution is one of the costliest and most removed from the immediate issue, according to many researchers. But while the question of whether mental health and substance abuse issues are the most important cause of homelessness is up for debate, the fact that these issues are highly occurring within homeless populations is indisputable. In fact, “Over 60% of people who are chronically homeless have experienced lifetime mental health problems and over 80% have experienced lifetime alcohol and/or drug problems” (“Current Statistics”). Proponents of providing more services to the homeless population or population at risk of becoming homeless argue that mental health and substance abuse clearly play an important role in homelessness.

Increased services can take many forms. They could be mobile clinics or free appointments at counseling centers for people struggling with these issues, both homeless people and those at risk of being homeless. They could also be providing more educational resources in schools and community centers about the dangers of these disorders and how to get help.

An even more large-scale solution would be to broadly increase health care access for homeless people and those at risk of being homeless. Proponents argue that while providing medical care for homeless people is costly, providing them healthcare would prevent some of the most expensive emergency room visits (Araj, 2023)

Opponents of this solution argue that it is highly costly to increase medical services at the scale they need to be increased to have an impact.

## Political Perspectives on this Solution

Both liberals and conservatives often include provisions for mental health services when they write legislation addressing homelessness. Liberals would likely favor expanding health care access and providing more preventative measures, whereas conservatives often prioritize measures that help homeless people

directly on the streets or in shelters (“Democratic Party and the Republican Party”).

## BUDGETARY CONSIDERATIONS

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It is important to keep in mind budgetary considerations when brainstorming legislative solutions. Senators are much less likely to compromise on excessively expensive bills. As such, some solutions, such as providing more affordable housing vouchers, are more expensive than others, such as running an educational campaign on the link between unaffordable housing and homelessness.

## CONCLUSION

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The issue of homelessness in the U.S. is complex. Solutions range from providing homeless people immediate assistance to addressing issues of unaffordable housing and inadequate mental health services in the U.S. The affordable housing crisis is itself a highly complex social issue with its own set of wide-ranging solutions. This briefing only covered an overview of the affordable housing crisis, and delegates are invited to do further research on the issue before coming to the conference.

What’s more, delegates should come prepared with a thorough understanding of their senator’s’ positions on the different solutions to the homelessness crisis. It is also important to understand whether individual senators are willing to negotiate on issues, as compromise is essential to all legislation. Even though any given solution could address a wide range of issues, it is imperative that bills have specific and actionable solutions to the crisis of homelessness that so many Americans are facing.



*Homeless  
encampment in  
Reno, Nevada*  
NBC News

## GUIDE TO FURTHER RESEARCH

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This briefing is only the beginning of the discussion on homeless in the U.S. Each delegate should take time to research their senators’ viewpoints on this policy issue, and to research what the issue of homelessness looks like in the communities their senator serves. Attaining information from reputable news sources is crucial. The sources in the bibliography are a good place to start. Delegates should come prepared with knowledge about their state and with policy ideas.

## GLOSSARY

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**Affordable Housing Crisis** – “a shortage of single-family homeownership opportunities due to a low supply of homes and challenges facing first-time buyers” (Bailey, 2022)

**Chronic homelessness** – being homeless for more than 12 months, often leads to mental health and substance abuse issues, as well as increased difficulty of finding stable housing.

**Civil Commitment** – court-ordered institutionalization of a person suffering from mental illness or substance abuse issues. The institutionalization is usually ordered upon finding that the person is dangerous to themselves or others.

**Episodic homelessness** – repeated but brief periods of homelessness

**Section 8 voucher program** – an affordable housing program that provides vouchers to low-income families. The families then use the vouchers to pay their rent, allowing them to maintain safe and stable housing.

**The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)** – a tax credit to housing developers that “subsidizes the acquisition, construction, and rehabilitation of affordable rental housing for low- and moderate-income tenants” (“What is the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit”).

**Transient homelessness** – a single brief period of homelessness

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