

POLICY FOCUS

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America's Failure to Address Homelessness

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HIGHLIGHT

The federal government instituted Housing First as the country's exclusive approach to homelessness in 2013. Services such as mental health counseling and substance abuse counseling were defunded, and resources were reallocated to additional housing vouchers. The Obama-Biden administration promised this seismic policy shift would end homelessness by 2023, but the number of homeless Americans is at the highest number ever recorded, as is their death rate.

INTRODUCTION

Housing First is a public policy approach to homelessness that connects the homeless to permanent housing without preconditions and barriers to entry, such as sobriety, treatment, or service participation requirements. It originated in the 90s **as an approach specifically for New York City's street homeless** who were endangering themselves and becoming increasingly burdensome on the public safety and health systems.

The suggestion was that this population would agree to housing only if it were offered

without conditions such as sobriety or engagement in services.

In 2008, the federal government adopted this approach nationwide for the chronically homeless population—approximately **10-20 percent of the nation's homeless**—the majority of whom struggle with physical disabilities, mental illness, and addiction.

Four years later, in 2013, with limited evidence of its effectiveness, and without evidence it would effectively address the remaining **80-90 percent of the homeless population**, the federal government rolled out permanent, “unconditional” housing to all Americans struggling with homelessness.

Many Americans have been ludicrously forced to abandon sidewalks, parks, and expectations of public order and safety while watching billions of their tax dollars being spent on an approach that is resulting only in more homelessness.

In 2023, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) reported that **653,000 Americans were struggling with homelessness**—the highest point ever recorded in our nation's history and a 12 percent increase over 2022.

Meanwhile, many Americans have been ludicrously forced to abandon sidewalks, parks, and expectations of public order and safety while watching billions of their tax dollars being spent on an approach that is resulting only in more homelessness.

THE SHIFT TO A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL APPROACH PROVOKED THE RISE IN HOMELESSNESS

There are many speculations as to what led to this humanitarian catastrophe, including

the COVID-19 pandemic, a shortage of affordable housing, and a lack of spending. But the HUD's very own data suggest that these three factors are not the main drivers of increased homelessness. Instead, the numbers point to a consistent and stark rise in homelessness after the seismic policy shift to Housing First that occurred in 2013.

When the federal government instituted Housing First as the country's exclusive approach to homelessness, clinical services such as mental health and substance use disorder counseling were wholly defunded, and the money instead supported housing subsidies (*i.e.* vouchers), most of which are offered in perpetuity.

The move also abolished conditions such as sobriety and work participation for all struggling with homelessness, avowing that once stably housed, the homeless could “self-determine” their need for services.

The Obama administration promised the one-size-fits-all experiment would “**end homelessness in 10 years.**”

Ten years later, the number of homeless Americans has peaked, including a 147 percent increase in the unsheltered population.

The Sharp Increase in Homelessness Began Before COVID

Pre-pandemic data (2014-2019) from the HUD revealed a 20.5 percent increase in the nation's unsheltered population under the shift to Housing First, despite a 42.7 percent

increase in housing voucher subsidies during the same period. In [California](#)—the only state to fully adopt Housing First (2016)—pre-pandemic data revealed a 47.1 percent increase in the unsheltered population, despite a 33 percent increase in housing voucher subsidies.

Not only do these outcomes exonerate the pandemic as the primary driver of the nation's homeless crisis, but they also invalidate the hypothesis that housing, in and of itself, solves homelessness. The number of housing subsidies rose substantially at the national level and in California, yet the numbers struggling with homelessness did, too.

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Lack of Affordable Housing Is Not a New Challenge

Barriers to the development of affordable housing must be addressed in many areas throughout our country. However, the [shortage of affordable housing](#) is not a recent phenomenon. To this end, it does not reflect ingenuity on the part of the policymakers who chose to handcuff the country to a policy based solely on the availability of “enough” affordable housing.

Homelessness Has Increased Alongside Increased Housing Spending

A lack of spending is an equally implausible driver. Under Housing First in the pre-pandemic period, federal spending increased by 200 percent. In California, it increased by 101 percent.

Post-pandemic, because of CARES Act I and II, as well as funding in the American Rescue Plan, an even greater spending windfall occurred, but as referenced earlier, the homeless boon continued as well.

Further evidence out of California is an [April 2024 state auditor report](#) that California's \$24 billion investment in homelessness resulted in a “lack of outcomes;” “inconsistent evaluation of efforts to prevent and end homelessness;” and, as cited earlier, increased homelessness.

The debunking of these three misconceptions at the national level and in California—and the timing of the sharp increase in homelessness following 2013—suggests that the shift to Housing First as a uniform approach to homelessness exacerbated our country's homelessness crisis.

FIVE MYTHS UNDERLIE HOUSING FIRST

Housing First is a failure because it is based on several flawed premises.

1) Housing solves homelessness. The HUD's own data debunks this myth. As referenced earlier in the paper, the number of permanent housing units rose substantially at the national level and in California, yet the numbers struggling with homelessness did, too.

2) Everyone struggling with homelessness needs an individual housing unit that is permanently subsidized. This is as impractical as it is unsustainable. Under this approach, no one exits the system. Thus, there is no room for new people who are then forced to line up on the streets until more permanent housing is built. We will never build “enough” individual housing units to satisfy demand.

By their very nature, individual housing units isolate the homeless. Congregate, temporary

residential environments, which were defunded under the Housing First approach, are not only more cost-effective, but they also provide communities of support which are a crucial element for those struggling with addiction. Permanently-subsidized, individual housing units discourage individuals from seeking purpose and support. There is no requirement or incentive to work, to heal, or to grow, ever.

3) 20-30 percent of the homeless population are struggling with mental illness and/or addiction according to HUD data. This is false. The reality is that a much greater share of the homeless population struggles with these challenges.

Most non-profits—except for faith-based providers—are largely, if not exclusively, reliant on HUD funding, which does not fund mental health or addiction treatment services. This disincentivizes the non-profit from suggesting services.

The UCLA Policy Lab and the LA Times debunked this myth finding that **78 percent of the chronically homeless population** struggle with the diseases of mental illness and/or addiction. A **recent report** from the UCSF Benioff Institute had a similar finding.

Most who struggle with mental illness and addiction also struggle with **anosognosia**—a deficit of self-awareness—meaning they don't know how sick they are.

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4) Once the homeless are stably housed, they will request services. This is improbable due to the diseases with which the homeless struggle.

The U.S. Surgeon General labels mental illness and addiction as **complex, brain disorders** that often result in brain disruptions that can reduce brain function. Reduced brain function, in turn, can inhibit an individual's ability to make decisions and regulate action. Reduced self-awareness, in combination with the reduced capacity for sound decision-making, makes the requesting of such services improbable.

A **14-year study**, in which homeless people in Boston were allowed to self-determine for services, proved to be both deadly and ineffective. Nearly half of the housed chronically homeless individuals died by year

five, and only 36 percent of those housed remained so after year five.

5) Homelessness can be ended. This is false. Homelessness has always been with us. Of course we should try to minimize homelessness and poverty, but we will never completely eliminate them.

Promising to end homelessness, as the Obama administration did in 2013, is not just an empty promise, but it also significantly damages the credibility of those who mention it.

HOMELESS POLICY EXCLUDES MANY CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

An additional grave flaw in the institutionalization of Housing First was the HUD's decision to modify the federal government's definition of homeless—the

McKinney-Vento Act—thereby “disqualifying” many homeless families.

Specifically, families who are temporarily doubled up in housing (even if sleeping on the garage floor of someone’s home) are not included in the HUD’s modified definition and thus do not meet the HUD’s criteria for assistance. Families that manage to scrape up enough funding for a motel room are also not considered “homeless enough”... though they are considered homeless if the **HUD funds their room**.

The HUD’s modified definition is the basis of its annual Point-In-Time (PIT) count. As referenced earlier in this paper, while the

The long-term ramifications of homelessness for children are very harmful. These children, beset with a wide array of overwhelming life challenges, are much more likely to become addicted, mentally ill, and seemingly “unemployable” homeless adults living on the streets, without early and effective intervention.

HUD reports 653,000 homeless Americans in 2023, the Department of Education, using the unaltered definition, reported a vastly different figure. They documented **1,099,221 homeless K-12 students in the 2020-2021 school year** (the latest data available), a figure that does not include the students’ parent(s) nor any siblings outside of the K-12 system.

Not only is the nation’s crisis much grimmer than the HUD is reporting, but the “non-counted” families are also ineligible for HUD-funded resources, the largest source of public funding for the homeless.

The implications of this exclusion are severe in the short term, but even more so in the long term.

Data from the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness, the Journal of the

American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the National Child Traumatic Stress Network reveal that:

- **24 percent to 40 percent** of homeless school-age children experienced mental health problems requiring clinical evaluation, a rate 2 to 4 times higher than poor children in the National Survey of America’s Families.
- Homeless students perform far worse than their non-homeless classmates, “with proficiency rates on both English and math tests close to 20 points lower than their housed classmates” in a **NYC study**.
- Homeless children have **twice the rate of learning disabilities and three times the rate of emotional and behavioral problems**, all of which make homeless students twice as likely to repeat a grade compared to non-homeless children.”

The long-term ramifications of homelessness for children are very harmful. These children, beset with a wide array of overwhelming life challenges, are much more likely to become addicted, mentally ill, and seemingly “unemployable” homeless adults living on the streets, without early and effective intervention. Indeed, the latest data available from the **United States Interagency Council in their 2020 Expanding the Toolbox report** show this deterioration happening at an increasingly alarming rate.

SOLUTIONS

Human beings are, by their very nature, complex. Any policy solution must be human-centered, versus housing-centered, and its foundation must be built on a human being's inherent needs. This means we should return to a policy of putting humans first, not Housing First.

Human beings are designed for purpose, not just mere existence in housing. We must help the homeless heal from the issues that underlie their homelessness—**largely mental illness, addiction, and trauma**—to gain clarity and purpose.

By putting humans first, we will ensure that underlying diseases are addressed, that quality of life is improved, and that dignity and purpose are restored to each individual, family, and community experiencing homelessness.

Human beings either grow, or they die. Inherent in growth is effort. Those struggling with homelessness must be required to participate in their growth and take a level of responsibility to grow and prosper.

Human beings are designed to love and be loved, which requires that they be in community with one another. Our homeless system must create opportunities for the homeless to build community, and to experience and give love.

Homeless policy must focus on the needs of those struggling with homelessness in

parallel with the needs of the communities surrounding them. Many Americans have been ludicrously forced to abandon our sidewalks, parks, and our expectations of public order and safety.

Homeless policy must insist on guardrails of responsibility at every level of the system, from governments at the federal, state, and local levels, to the individuals struggling with homelessness and the non-profits serving them.

The federal government must require that each of its agencies aligns with the McKinney-Vento homeless definition to ensure that all struggling with homelessness

are included in the nation's homelessness count and have access to the available homeless resources.

Without these pillars in place, the United States will continue to fail the homeless and society-at-large, while wasting outrageous sums of taxpayer money in the process.

By putting humans first, we will ensure that underlying diseases are addressed, that quality of life is improved, and that dignity and purpose are restored to each individual, family, and community experiencing homelessness.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Get Informed

Learn more about homelessness in the U.S. Check out:

- [Answers Behind The RED DOOR: Battling the Homeless Epidemic](#)
- [Subsidizing Addiction](#)
- [More Housing Isn't the Solution to Homelessness- It's Treatment](#)
- [Family Homelessness in D.C. Is Growing](#)

Talk to Your Friends

Help your friends and family understand these important issues. Share this information, tell them about what's going on, and encourage them to join you in getting involved.

Become a Leader in the Community

Start an Independent Women's Network chapter group so you can get together with friends each month to talk about a political/policy issue (it will be fun!). Write a letter to the editor. Show up at local government meetings and make your opinions known. Go to rallies. Better yet, organize rallies! A few motivated people can change the world.

Remain Engaged Politically

Too many good citizens see election time as the only time they need to pay attention to politics. We need everyone to pay attention and hold elected officials accountable. Let your Representatives know your opinions. After all, they are supposed to work for you!

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ABOUT INDEPENDENT WOMEN'S FORUM

Independent Women's Forum (IWF) is dedicated to building support for free markets, limited government, and individual responsibility. IWF, a non-partisan, 501(c)(3) research and educational institution, seeks to combat the too-common presumption that women want and benefit from big government, and build awareness of the ways that women are better served by greater economic freedom. By aggressively seeking earned media, providing easy-to-read, timely publications and commentary, and reaching out to the public, we seek to cultivate support for these important principles and encourage women to join us in working to return the country to limited, Constitutional government.