

How to combat homelessness

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We all know the headlines. Homelessness is one of the biggest issues facing California. Despite new efforts and billions in funding, homelessness continues to soar.

With a problem so far-reaching in our state, you would think we would understand this crisis better. But new research shows that many common views on homelessness are unfounded stereotypes. It's time to discard them and let the research guide us to solutions that can really make a difference.

For one, a common narrative has taken shape that individuals move to California after they have lost their housing elsewhere for the good weather and the abundance of services our state has to offer. But last month, a new report on homelessness in California from the Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative at UC San Francisco discovered that nine out of 10 survey respondents had lost their housing in California — 75 percent of them in the county where they currently reside.

The report also stands in stark contrast to the stereotypical portrayal of homelessness being solely the product of mental illness and substance abuse disorders. For most respondents, a combination of high housing costs and low income led to their homelessness.

While the study identified high rates of mental illness and addiction in their sample, many individuals came to experience these afflictions while experiencing homelessness, not before. And most agreed that even if these issues contributed to their current situation, they would not have lost their housing if they had received limited financial assistance.

Our recently completed three-year evaluation of the Jewish Family Service San Diego Safe Parking Program found similar trends while reviewing client data for 1,126 households and insights from over 300 interviews with clients and staff. Safe parking programs are sanctioned locations where people who live out of their vehicles can park overnight and

receive access to resources. Our research shows that safe parking clients defy the most common stereotypes associated with homelessness.

Not only did most individuals using the Jewish Family Service San Diego Safe Parking Program lose their housing while living in San Diego, but more than half of these individuals between the ages of 20 to 59 are actively employed. While older adults using the lots are less likely to work — either due to their age, disability and/or health — most have lengthy employment histories.

One woman we interviewed, who held two college degrees and had worked in health care for almost 30 years, explained to us how she lost her housing: “Because of the repercussions of liver failure, I have what they call brain fog. And I was just exhausted all the time. I couldn’t do anything because my body was failing and so I had to leave my job. Or ... my job would leave me because I wasn’t performing.”

Her story is not atypical.

Clients of the Jewish Family Service San Diego Safe Parking Program also have lower rates of mental illness and substance abuse disorders compared to the general population. For instance, while 1.7 percent of those using the safe parking lots noted that they suffered from an addiction, that is just a fraction of the 16.5 percent of individuals aged 12 or older in the U.S. who have had a substance use disorder.

Research like this is sorely needed because unchecked negative stereotypes result in the creation of ordinances that criminalize homelessness, including sleeping in one’s vehicle. And they can fuel resistance to the opening of new homelessness services.

Take opposition to the creation of new safe parking lots. Many worry that the opening of new lots will bring higher crime rates to their communities. But according to our study, those who use safe parking programs defy stereotypes, namely that people experiencing homelessness are lazy, do not work, steal and experience high rates of mental illness and addiction that make their behavior hard to predict. In fact, we consistently heard how people appreciate the sense of safety the Safe Parking Program provides them. This was especially true among women using the program. We also found that local safe parking lots connect clients to housing more effectively than several traditional emergency shelters.

Service providers, local officials and advocates should take note of research findings that debunk stereotypes, using these findings to raise public awareness of the reality of homelessness. One way this can be accomplished is by holding public forums for community members before the opening of new homelessness services, including safe parking lots. These public forums can be a valuable place for community members to share their fears and to have their fears assuaged by learning that those experiencing homelessness are just like them.

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