

Homelessness in the U.S.: Public Attitudes and Policy

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Homelessness is a serious social problem in the United States. As of 2020, over half a million individuals in the U.S. were reported to be homeless, with over 100,000 experiencing chronic homelessness.¹ Despite its decline over the past two decades, the primary factors associated with homelessness (e.g., lack of affordable housing, inability to afford healthcare, domestic violence, mental illness, addiction, and poverty) have persisted in contemporary society.²

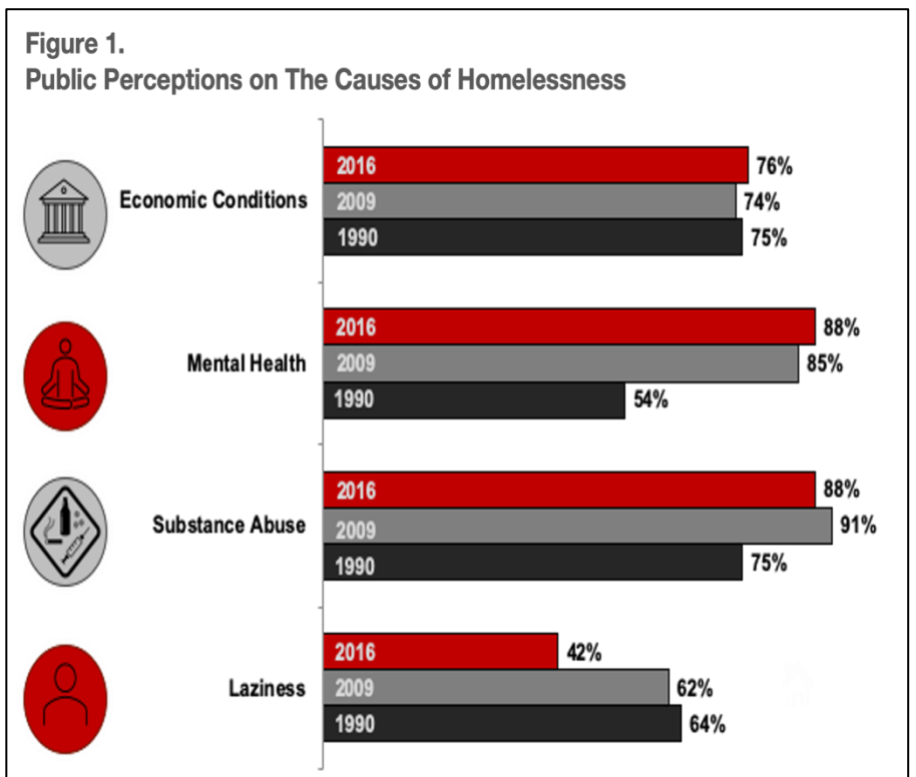
To combat the increasingly visible problem of homelessness and its collateral consequences, many major cities have begun criminalizing homelessness. For example, the Las Vegas City Council passed an ordinance in November 2019 prohibiting camping or sleeping on public streets if beds at established shelters are available. Violators of this law would be charged with a misdemeanor. This law also made it a crime to camp or sleep in public spaces near a residential property, within set city districts, or within 500 feet of a receiving dock of a food processing facility, if space is available at the Courtyard Homeless Resource Center or any public shelter within the city's jurisdiction. For this offense, violators could be sentenced up to six months in jail or a fine of \$1000.³

The current policy brief summarizes public attitudes surrounding homelessness in Nevada and the U.S., identify sources of variability in these public attitudes, and highlight the general arguments underlying the policy debate about homelessness and its control.

Public Opinion on Homelessness

American's concern about homelessness has been well documented in national surveys over the past two decades. These concerns about homelessness has steadily increased over time, within over half of U.S. residents in a 2021 survey indicating a "great deal of worry" about the issue. Other studies have taken a closer examination of public views about the causes of homelessness and support for various policies addressing this problem.^{4,5,6,7}

As shown in Figure 1, the clear majority of Americans believe that poor economic conditions and substance abuse lead to homelessness and these beliefs have remained fairly consistent over time. The proportion of U.S. residents who believe that poor mental health is a contributing factor to homelessness has increased over time, whereas the public sentiment that homelessness is a product of laziness has declined in recent years.



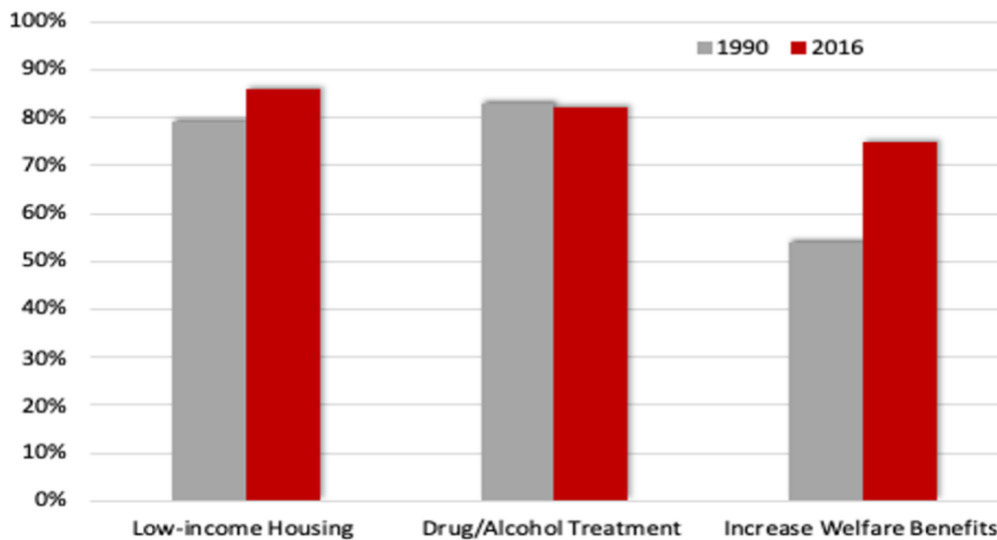
Public opinion surveys have also examined various attitudes about policy-based solutions to homelessness. These surveys have focused primarily on policies that either (1) provide aid and other support services for the homeless or (2) provide restrictions and criminalize particular activities of the homeless.

Overall, past studies have found enormous support for policies that aid the homeless.^{5,7} In particular, the clear majority of Americans support policies that provide affordable housing, provide free drug and alcohol treatment, and increase welfare benefits (see Figure 2). Regarding the level of support for exclusionary or restrictive policies, a large proportion of Americans believe that the homeless should be allowed to sleep overnight in public places, set up tents or other temporary shelters, and panhandle in public places.^{5,7}

A more recent survey has examined national and state-level attitudes about homelessness involving the issue of (1) improving state funding for low-income housing and (2) criminalizing sleeping in public places (CCJP, 2021). This study found that 74% of Americans support increasing state funding for low-income housing for the homeless,

whereas less than half of this national sample (41%) supported policies that make it illegal for homeless people to sleep/camp overnight in public areas. Similar levels of support were found for residents of Nevada (76% and 39%, respectively).

Figure 2.
Public Support for Policies Aiding the Homeless



POLICY ISSUES

Public attitudes about the different aspects of homelessness are also likely to influence their endorsement of particular public policies to control this problem. There are major sources of public debate surrounding housing, displacement, and the criminalization of particular activities involving the homeless. The primary arguments used to support and oppose these policies are summarized in Figure 3 and described below.

In regard to the issue of housing for the homeless, Housing First has become a widespread movement across the nation since its inception in 2009. Proponents of Housing First argue that (1) the cost of delivering housing are offset by reductions in costs for crisis services, (2) this program is also effective in ending homelessness (rather than prolonging), and (3) Housing First is a more efficient and humane allocation of resources compared to other homeless housing initiatives like emergency shelter.⁸ In contrast, opponents of these housing programs argue that housing first initiatives are a "one-size-fits-all" approach that ignores the underlying reasons of why many people fall victim to homelessness. Other opponents argue that there is no strong evidence that Housing First improves mental health and substance abuse disorders as it claims⁹.



Another controversial area in public policy about homelessness is that of displacement. One of the issues with Housing First policies is the vagueness in the matter of where every specific person will be placed once receiving housing. In particular, under these programs, there is a great risk of displacement involving the separation of family, friends, and other social connections made in encampments. Opponents also argue that displacing encampments inevitably leaves some people unsheltered, individuals have less control over their lives and possessions, and overall ignores harms of continual displacement.¹⁰ Although Housing First ensures that everyone does receive housing, it is unclear the impact it has on the separation of families and overall social capital, which is an essential component of survival.

Finally, to understand how to effectively solve homelessness in our society, it is important to discuss both oppositions and support of criminalization policies. Those in favor of criminalization policies argue that potential benefits of such legislation may result in maintaining order on streets and overall crime reduction. However, many organizations such as the National Coalition for the Homeless (2021) explain the many civil rights violations that come with such policies, for example prohibiting and making it illegal to engage “in life-sustaining activities such as sleeping/camping, eating, sitting, and/or asking for money/resources in public spaces.”¹¹

CONCLUSION

Public attitudes on homelessness are often used to develop policies and practices to best address this social problem. The larger focus should continue to move in the direction of evidence-based practices to properly allocate resources and provide the best solutions to individuals to meet their needs.

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