

In a time when we are told to stay inside our houses to protect others, and ourselves, I began thinking of the thousands of people who are without homes or safe places to take refuge. While developing my understanding of homelessness, I set out to answer questions like: “What are the causes of homelessness? How are people without homes being affected by Covid-19? Are there solutions to help those who are in need of homes?”

I have created a sculpture to highlight the correlation between homelessness and structure. Made out of wood, the architectural model is an extremely simplistic representation of a house. The accompanying concrete block creates an emphasis on the foundation of the structure.

Housing is a need and necessity, and through my work, I hope to raise awareness of how the “foundation” of a house can affect a person and help them grow. The model is also a representation of affordable housing and the need for more of it. The widening housing affordability gap is one of the main causes of homelessness. If we as a society can realize the importance of housing, and help reduce the housing affordability gap, we can help many people and families into their own homes.

Kate H.
Brainerd, Minnesota

Understanding Homelessness

Kate H.



Podcast: **Understanding Homelessness, Learning Together**

Episode 1: The Basics Of Homelessness

There are an estimated 568,000 people experiencing homelessness in the United States. To understand why, we need to examine the fundamental causes. Welcome to episode one of Understanding Homelessness, Learning Together. My name is Kate and I'm hoping to uncover the roots and causes of homelessness alongside my listeners. In this episode we are going to focus on and try to answer questions like, "How many people are homeless in the United States? And how do these people become homeless?" At first glance, these questions looked simple enough, but I soon found out that these essential questions are quite the opposite of simple.

So we find ourselves Going back to what I said just a few moments ago that, "On a single night in 2019, roughly [568,000](#) people were experiencing homelessness in the United States." This information is from The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress,. When we think about this number, I believe we need to understand that one person can not fit, can not encompass the 568,000 people. These people are veterans, mothers, children, transgender teens, families, immigrants, the elderly, etc. Homelessness is not a one size fits all. The homeless population also displays the racial inequality in the United States and the Annual Homeless Assessment Report states that, "African Americans have remained considerably [overrepresented](#) among the homeless population compared to the U.S. population." The National Alliance to End Homelessness also acknowledges that, "Most minority groups in the United States experience homelessness at higher rates than Whites, and therefore make up a [disproportionate](#) share of the homeless population... By far the most striking disproportionality can be found among African Americans, who make up 40 percent of the homeless population despite only representing 13 percent of the general population." There is also a high rate of people with disabilities who are without homes, and this makes access to services and shelters even more difficult. And although the national percentage of homelessness has increased since 2018, there have been improvements for families and veterans. The number of homeless families has decreased along with the percentage of homeless veterans. So with this foundation I think that we can move on to the question of how people and families actually become homeless?

The path to homelessness is usually not easily understood. Some people believe that homelessness is just one person's fault and that if they could just get a job that they could escape homelessness. The truth is that homelessness is the direct result of systematic problems. One of the most attributed causes of homelessness is the widening housing affordability gap. The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) reveals that, "[A lack](#) of affordable housing and the limited scale of housing assistance programs have contributed to the current housing crisis and to homelessness." and that, "Homelessness and poverty are inextricably linked." Often people living in poverty must make hard decisions when they are unable to pay for housing, education,

food, child care, and health care. And with the United States minimum wage, I think that for many it is very difficult to climb out of poverty. The lack of accessible employment opportunities also adds tremendous weight to one's situation. The coalition also states that, "For families and individuals struggling to pay the rent, a serious illness or disability can start a [downward spiral](#) into homelessness, beginning with a lost job, depletion of savings to pay for care, and eventual eviction." With the cost of housing and healthcare combined with limited employment opportunities one can easily find themselves struggling to cover living expenses. Many women and children often find themselves in homelessness after trying to escape domestic violence and must choose between staying in an unsafe home or becoming homeless. The misinterpretation of addiction as it correlates to homelessness, can be a very dismissive way of identifying. The NCH has pointed out that, "[The relationship](#) between homelessness and alcohol and drug addiction is quite controversial. While addictive disorders appear disproportionately among the homeless population, such disorders cannot, by themselves, explain the increase in homelessness. Most drug and alcohol addicts never become homeless... In the last two decades, competition for increasingly scarce low income housing grew so intense that those with disabilities such as addictive and mental disorders were more likely to lose out and find themselves on the streets... Another important aspect to consider is that many addiction issues arise while people are experiencing homelessness, rather than causing them to become homeless." Like addiction, mental illness does not simply cause homelessness, what causes homelessness is when systems, like health care, fail to recognize and help these individuals. To summarize the causes of homelessness is to simply say that the cause of homelessness is from systematic problems, in housing affordability, health care, and employment, along with case to case factors. Because when we see a homeless person, we don't see their history, and we don't see who they are or who they want to be.

The CFC (Central Florida Commission) Homelessness YouTube channel has a video titled [Cardboard Stories | Homeless in Orlando](#). The video does a very good job of explaining what people don't see when they walk past a person who is without a home. This quote is from their video description: "[#RethinkHomelessness](#) asked our [#homeless](#) friends to write down a fact about themselves that other people wouldn't know just by walking past them. Their answers may surprise you." Some facts ranged from, "I speak 4 languages," to "Lost it all Starting over!" along with, "I once had a scholarship to play baseball," and finally to "I surrendered my kids to save them from homelessness." I think that we all need to rethink homelessness and with that this episode comes to an end, I encourage you to continue to learn together, thank you for listening to Understanding Homelessness, Learning Together.

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Episode 2: Homelessness and Covid-19

Welcome back to Understanding Homelessness, Learning Together. In this episode we are going to be talking about the global Covid-19 Pandemic and how it is affecting homeless communities. What are the homeless supposed to do when the country is in a stay-at-home order? Shelters are crowded and potentially unsafe, but the streets are also unsafe. So how are homeless people dealing with this kind of global emergency? And it makes me wonder if this global emergency has raised awareness of the importance of housing? Today I have a guest who can answer some of these questions, her name is Kristy Greenwalt and she works with homelessness in Washington D.C.

Hi Kristy, how are you doing?

I'm doing good.

Can you introduce yourself and maybe just tell us a few things about you?

Sure, so my name is Kristy Greenwalt and I am the director to End Homelessness here in Washington, D.C. I work for Mayor Bowser. I've worked on homelessness for, really, most of my career. I spent some time with the Obama Administration before I took this job. I've always worked in the form of housing and homelessness field. Yeah, that's a little bit of my background.

My first question is, what is the most appropriate language to use when discussing homelessness, or someone who is experiencing homelessness?

Yeah, so that's a great question. I have this conversation often, and it's to talk about someone who is experiencing homelessness or you know, your neighbor who is experiencing homelessness a lot of times people say like, "the homeless guy on the corner." Or often I think you're right, people use sort of derogatory terms, but the reality is that someone's housing status doesn't define who they are as a person. And it's not a permanent status, it's something that they are experiencing at a point in time. And there is a lot of reasons why people might end up homeless, and there are a lot of reasons that I think everybody can relate to; whether it's sometimes a health issue, or they've lost a job, or they might have experienced domestic violence. All those things can lead to homelessness. For most people it's a short and temporary thing, so generally that's what I would say if someone is experiencing homelessness.

Do you want to talk about some of the difficult challenges you and others are faced with during this time?

Yeah, I definitely think for those of us that work in this field, homelessness in and of itself is an emergency for the people that are experiencing it and I'm sure you can sort of put yourself in their shoes and think about how scary it would be if you literally didn't have anywhere to go that

was safe and that you know was your own. So if you didn't have any money in the bank and you didn't have a support network like family or friends who could help you, that's a terrifying experience for the people that are experiencing that and so I think for those of us in the field, our job is really crisis management and in the middle of a pandemic where the recommendations of all health experts is literally to stay home and do everything you can to isolate, that is the one thing that someone who is experiencing homelessness can not do. So of course we are scrambling, we as a collective, we as a society, have let homelessness get so out of control that it literally can't be fixed overnight. So it presents huge challenges to us as a society because there are no quick fixes and we are really scrambling to do everything we can, quite literally, to save peoples' lives.

And what about testing rates, are homeless people able to get tests at the same rate as others?

Yep, so here in D.C. one of the things that I think is challenging right now is that there's very, I would argue and I think a lot of people might agree, is that there has been very little federal leadership and so it's really been up to every governor and even mayor at the city level to kind of decide their own path forward. So every public health agency across the country is, sort of, looking at federal guidance but they still make up the rules for their state. Here in the District of Columbia, because testing has been so limited we are only testing people that are symptomatic and we do not have enough tests even for everybody that's (sick). We haven't, that's changing by the day, but certainly when this all started to emerge in February and in early March there simply was not enough tests. People that are experiencing homelessness could get tests at the same rate as everybody else, but there just, there weren't enough tests for everybody. And I think some of us that work in the field would argue that people that are living in a congregate setting, congregate meaning you share space with other people, like you live in dorms and you share food and bathroom facilities. So you live in these big congregate settings where it can spread really easily. We would like testing to be more available to people who are in those settings because we know that they're much more at risk. That hasn't been the case and there certainly has not been more testing for people experiencing homelessness, but they do have the same access that everybody else has had.

Do you think that this pandemic has made people realize that housing is essential and shelter is essential?

That's a great question. My colleagues and I talk about this a lot. I would sure like to think that it's made people rethink the issue of housing insecurity and homelessness, I'm not confident yet, that people understand how interconnected our well being is. Meaning we all do better when everybody has housing, has food, has healthcare and the basic foundations of life. I'm not sure if everybody is there and recognizes that yet. I do know, I saw on the news this morning in New York for example, Governor Cuomo at the daily press conference, one of the things he was

talking about today was that they were going to have to close down the subway in New York because so many people experiencing homelessness have taken refuge in the subway system. People were complaining and they were upset about the condition and that it's not clean, and it's not sanitary. So they were going to shut down the subway system every night. To me that still sounded like we're blaming people who are experiencing homelessness instead of blaming the policies and blaming the system that created it. So I'm not confident that we are there yet, but we'll see what happens.

That concludes my questions, do you have anything else you would like to say before we end?

I think the only thing I would say is really that the question you just asked around how do you change public perception, I found that people tend to blame the person who is experiencing homelessness, like it was some character flaw that they had that somehow made them become homeless, versus understanding that there's not enough affordable homes and that the jobs that people have access to. Because somebody's got to make coffee at Starbucks and somebody's got to be a janitor at your school, and if you have jobs like that in a city like Washington D.C. you can't afford housing. You just really can't. You would have to work, the data tells us, that if you are a minimum wage worker, in a city like this where housing is so expensive, you have to work three jobs to afford housing. So you can't, you physically can't work three jobs, that's 120 hours a week. We can't blame people, we have to fix our society. And so I'm super excited that you took up this project because I think that getting on a better path is really going to be incumbent on young people starting to really push this issue of social equity and racial equity and that we are a country that can afford to make sure that everybody gets healthcare and that everybody has access to housing, and that we all do better like I said, when everybody has those basics.

Thank you so much for talking to us today, have a great day.

Yeah, my pleasure.

Alright that concludes this episode, I want to thank you for listening and joining me today on Understanding Homelessness, Learning Together.

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Episode 3: Solutions

Welcome back to Understanding Homelessness, Learning Together. This episode is going to be fully devoted to exploring the solutions to end homelessness. Let's get started, let's talk about some proven solutions.

Shelters and transition housing can often be the first step to help someone rise out of homelessness. Shelters often provide spaces for people to get a good night's rest and can help to prepare them for work or getting a job. As with transition housing, this allows people to stabilize themselves and to continue improving their lives. Staying at a transition house often is the step between homelessness and finding a permanent house.

For many families federal housing assistance has saved them from homelessness. But, what exactly is federal housing assistance? According to the Coalition For The Homeless, “The two [largest federal housing programs](#) are public housing and federal housing vouchers, known as Housing Choice Vouchers or Section 8 vouchers. Housing vouchers allow low-income households to rent modest market-rate housing of their choice and provide a flexible subsidy that adjusts with the family's income over time.” To be the most beneficial though, more federal dollars are needed for housing assistance. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reveals that, “Despite the importance of rental assistance, more [federal dollars](#) go to homeownership subsidies like the mortgage interest deduction, which mainly benefit higher-income households, instead of families that struggle the most to afford housing.” Federal housing assistance is a great program that has saved so many people and families, if we could get more funding into this program we could provide long term homes to many more adults and children.

What's another solution? Well for many people with long term or serious illness, permanent supportive housing can be the key for escaping homelessness and getting medical help. Again the Coalition For The Homeless explains that, “The [supportive housing model](#) combines affordable housing assistance with vital support services for individuals living with mental illness, HIV/AIDS or other serious health problems. Moreover, numerous research studies have shown that permanent supportive housing costs less than other forms of emergency and institutional care.” Permanent supportive housing can bring people, and keep people out of homelessness and get the care they need, this solution also saves taxpayer dollars that would have been spent on hospitalizations or shelters.

The Coalition For The Homeless outlines that the [“housing first”](#) plan is also successful. The housing first approach to homelessness is all about helping and creating a sense of community. Housing first moves long term homeless people into subsidized housing and surrounds residents

with a sense of community where they can find supportive services. Many residents often find help and improve their health all while remaining in a stable home.

The most fundamental cause of homelessness is the widening housing affordability gap. If the government at every level would invest in affordable housing, many more people could find themselves out of the streets and into homes. If we can make housing more affordable, or if we can support the building of more sustainable affordable housing, we can prevent homelessness and help get people into the housing that they need. It is also important to note that in any housing solutions, collaboration with the homeless is needed and very important.

And while making healthcare more accessible isn't a direct solution to homelessness, it would help many people and families from becoming homeless. For some, a major health emergency can be costly and the beginning of eviction, leading to homelessness. Paying for medical insurance similarly can create debt, which can also lead someone into becoming unable to pay for housing. We should also note that anti-homeless architecture, like spikes on a sidewalk, is not a solution. I believe that anti-homeless architecture actually propels homelessness further from being recognized. It is far from a solution and does nothing to help people who are simply trying to escape homelessness.

I encourage all of you to become involved in our communities and help end homelessness. There are so many things you can do to help, even just by listening to this podcast you are helping. Reach out and become involved in programs you are interested in. Thank you for listening to Understanding Homelessness, Learning Together.

Resources

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