

Rethinking the Problem of Homelessness



'Home 2013', by David Tovey, created from the car the artist lived in during a period of homelessness.

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1. In 2013, David Tovey, an artist in his 30s, found himself living inside his red Peugeot 203. After suffering a stroke and losing his business, he faced poor health and addiction. For six months, he lived in his car. "The hardest part was pretending that everything was fine," he said. "I parked in different places at night so no one would notice. In the morning, I washed up in a public restroom and looked for work online at the library." What makes David Tovey's story unique is the original way in which he used his experience to call attention to the problem of homelessness. Tovey turned his car – his former shelter – into a work of art that symbolizes his determination to rebuild his life. This work of art has since been presented in the Saatchi Art Gallery.
2. Tovey's story is a reminder that homelessness is a complex phenomenon with a range of different causes. In many cases, it is the result of unexpected life events that could happen to anyone. Today, circumstances that are out of people's control are forcing ever higher numbers of individuals into homelessness. To target this growing problem, a combination of traditional and innovative efforts is needed.

Experts from several fields are taking the initiative and actively seeking creative ways to help cope with some of the challenges leading to and keeping individuals and families trapped in this vicious cycle. Society as a whole must take this responsibility seriously and make it a top priority.

Difficult Circumstances

3. Tovey's story reflects one common cause of homelessness: economic hardship. In many cities, the cost of living has skyrocketed, while salaries have remained static. Rising unemployment may leave individuals with no choice but to deplete their savings in order to pay for monthly bills, leading to the rapid but unexpected loss of the roof over their heads. Another major factor is the general lack of affordable housing. Cities like San Francisco and London struggle with housing shortages, leaving low-income families unable to find safe and affordable places to live. In developing countries, rapid urbanization has led to overcrowded slums where people live in unsafe conditions without basic services.
4. Additionally, mental health issues and addiction contribute to homelessness. A 2023 report by the National Alliance to End Homelessness found that approximately 25% of the homeless population in the US suffers from mental illness, and 38% struggle with substance abuse. But other social factors also play a role. Studies have also pointed to family breakdowns or domestic violence. Refugees and migrants often face homelessness when they arrive in a new country. These challenges are universal, but the solutions vary widely depending on local contexts.

Making a Difference

5. Some countries are beginning to give this societal issue the attention it deserves, and are innovating new ways of coping with it. One innovative approach comes from Finland's Housing First Program. In the early 2000s, the country had a significant homelessness problem, similar to many other developed nations. The

Finnish government implements the "Housing First" model. In contrast to traditional programs, this program prioritizes giving homeless individuals permanent housing *before* addressing other issues, such as employment or mental health. Once housed, individuals are then offered support services to help them rebuild their lives. "It's about feeling safe before you can start to think about the future again", says a resident of the program.

6. Other countries, too, are adopting innovative programs and policies. In Canada, the "At Home/Chez Soi" project which began in 2009 by the Mental Health Commission of Canada has seen great success. It was specifically designed to address homelessness among people with mental health challenges. It provides stable housing without preconditions. This essentially means that no matter who you are or what led to your homelessness, you are accepted to the program. Criteria such as participation in programs are not required. This all-are-welcome approach has helped to provide thousands of people with housing and support services.
7. Technology is another creative way to deal with homelessness. Some cities are using mobile apps to connect homeless people with critical resources such as shelters, food banks, and healthcare providers. Apps like *StreetLink* in the UK and *Community Connect* in the U.S allow users to alert local services about people sleeping in the street so that they can integrate real-time data, enabling service providers to coordinate resources more effectively.
8. Creative approaches such as these are always welcome, but there is no reason to throw out the baby with the bathwater. Some countries are taking a more traditional approach, which has proven to be effective as well. For instance, in 2005, Long Island City in the US simply doubled the number of support workers provided by their anti-homelessness program. This led to a reported 91% reduction in chronic homelessness by 2015. That is, the mere addition of social workers, case counsellors and administrative staff allowed more families to be reached in a

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shorter period of time, leading to unprecedented success in reducing homelessness.

Promoting New Skills

9. Other cities are taking a different approach, focusing on providing homeless people with the tools they need to help themselves. On the streets of Kolkata, India, homeless children are given food, shelter, education and healthcare. Every day, a bus brings them to a school built for them. These schools are designed for their specific needs, so they could eventually be integrated into regular public schools.
10. Other efforts to provide tools for independence include job training programs for the homeless in Germany, which help individuals reenter the workforce and Brazil's Bolsa Família program, an initiative that provides financial aid to the homeless for specific purposes like vaccines and schooling. And in the US homeless veterans are given interest-free loans to help them get back on their feet.

Win-Win for All

11. Methods such as these not only provide support or help for the homeless but also serve society as a whole. A study in Canada showed that for every \$10 spent on housing programs, \$9.60 was saved in reduced healthcare, social services, and justice system costs, making them highly cost-effective as well as humanitarian. Perhaps if societies can change their perspective and begin to view housing as an issue that affects everyone, the political will and funding required to cope with homeless will be more available.
12. Regardless of a person's circumstances or readiness, everyone has a basic right to a roof over their heads. The question of homelessness is an urgent issue which is ultimately the responsibility of governments and their populations. It needs to be addressed seriously, immediately, and with good will.

Adapted from:

- <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/08/homelessness-urban-housing-affordability/>
- <https://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/a-paradigm-shift-in-social-policy-how-finland-conquered-homelessness-a-ba1a531e-8129-4c71-94fc-7268c5b109d9>
- <https://www.unfairnation.com/p/how-3-cities-are-solving-homelessness>