

# Introduction

## CAN CITIES SOLVE GLOBAL HOMELESSNESS?

Finding ways to help struggling people in the face of flawed social service systems and inadequate affordable housing is a global quest. Cities around the world have much to learn from one another's successes, and failures, in grappling with the visible challenge of homelessness. Despite cultural, political, and economic differences, the universal conditions of sleeping rough are strikingly similar.

Some observers believe that homelessness is the fault of the individual who refuses to comply with social norms around work and lifestyle, making homelessness a problem the individual created. Economic analyses of the disparity of income distribution, however, lead housing policy experts to conclude that the growth in homelessness is associated with this inequality and the lack of rental support strategies to help the most vulnerable as the affordable-housing market shrinks. Social policy experts find fault in the weak service-delivery systems responsible for mental health, recovery from drug addiction, child welfare, and domestic violence prevention, among other services. To some degree, all of these causal statements are true.

Despite the complexity and the challenges of homelessness, cities are making tremendous strides toward solving what is often considered unsolvable. Each dedicated city worker, nonprofit staffer, and advocate

brings talent, energy, and resources to the task, approaching their efforts with determination to withstand the setbacks and maintain momentum in a field with tough odds. What keeps these tireless workers at their task? Despite the images of street encampments and individuals without homes that form a common tableau in most cities, evidence and strategies are being compiled that build a strong case for being able to tackle homelessness.

#### TEN CITIES, TEN DIFFERENT CHALLENGES

Street homelessness in Athens emerged as a citywide problem in 2014 at the height of two crises: the financial crisis resulting from a deep austerity program imposed by the European Union; and a humanitarian crisis brought on by the continued refugee flight from Syria and the Middle East. Thousands of individuals and families landed on the shores of Greek islands and were evacuated to Athens. It was no coincidence that the largest encampment of refugees formed in Victoria Square, a short walk from the Athens Solidarity Center, the city's main multiservice center for the poor and street homeless. The nearby Athens railway station is a common magnet for rough sleepers seeking opportunities for food, panhandling for change, and, once the station is deserted at night, bedding down in quiet abandoned corners. The refugee crisis complicated Athens's efforts to address another mounting challenge—the growth in youth drug use that strained families and lowered the age of the city's homeless population as many young users were no longer welcome at home.

Responsibility for care of refugees rests largely with the European Union. Social services, including shelter and substance abuse services, are the responsibility of the national government. But the city of Athens could not wait while European and national programs were being developed. Immediate action was needed. Officials there went to work.

The once-thriving industrial city of Baltimore suffered a devastating economic blow as steelmaking operations faltered in the late twentieth century and especially after Bethlehem Steel at Sparrows Point closed permanently in 2012. By the twenty-first century, Baltimore had shifted to a largely service-oriented economy with a colorfully redeveloped Inner

Harbor and the world-famous Johns Hopkins Hospital; however, many displaced steelworkers have faced difficulties fitting into the new economy. A city of under 600,000, Baltimore has also been plagued by recent leadership changes and has struggled to garner the support needed to implement a cogent vision for homelessness. As part of the process to update Baltimore's homeless plan in 2017, the Mayoral Workgroup on Homelessness under then mayor Catherine Pugh issued a set of recommendations highlighting the critical importance of city leadership.<sup>1</sup>

The Baltimore Continuum of Care, a local body mandated by federal funding, began coordinating a three-year homeless action plan that focused on affordable housing, homelessness prevention, temporary shelter with exit strategies, increased economic opportunity, and racial equity.<sup>2</sup> Less than two years later, however, Mayor Pugh left office under a cloud and city council president Bernard Young ascended to the position. Mayor Young turned the homeless services function over to a new, independent agency, the Mayor's Office of Homeless Services.<sup>3</sup> The director was charged with implementing a strategy employing committed partners whose efforts had yet to be coordinated. Mayor Young lost his seat in the 2020 Democratic primary and will be replaced by yet another new mayor after the general election. Despite these challenges, the number of homeless in Baltimore is moving in the right direction, down from 2,669 in 2017 to 2,294 in 2019.<sup>4</sup>

Bogotá, Colombia, is a vast metropolis of close to 8 million people located on a plateau over 8,500 feet in elevation in the vast Andean mountain range. The city covers more than twice the area of New York City's five boroughs. Although some of its poorest areas are informal settlements on the outskirts of the city, the densest concentrations of people living unsheltered are located in or near the city center. The municipal government is largely left to provide shelter with little assistance from the national government or the nonprofit sector.

Most of the homeless on the streets were men who peddled recyclables to serve their addictions, and illegal drug activity was concentrated in the notorious slum El Bronx, controlled by drug dealers and impervious to police intervention. Frustrated by the long-standing acceptance of this situation, the mayor, Enrique Peñalosa, cleared El Bronx of encampments and drug activity in 2016. The city's social service agencies had dozens of

staff on hand during the clear-out to triage and offer persons living on the street emergency accommodation and support services.

Shortly thereafter, the mayor launched interventions in four areas in addition to El Bronx. There were 2,863 rough sleepers found in all five areas combined in 2016, but only half took the city up on its offer of shelter. City officials realized they needed a better path off the streets for these vulnerable individuals, and a significant new investment was made, increasing the annual city budget for social services by 80 percent to expand the shelter system and make facilities and services more attractive to homeless people and diversified to meet varied needs.

Edmonton, with nearly 1 million residents, is the capital of the Canadian province of Alberta and is located in the oil-rich region of the Canadian Rockies. The city has become a recognized international leader in systems-level collaboration between agencies to address homelessness across sectors and over multiple administrations. Ahead of most other global cities, Edmonton implemented a street homeless count in 1999. After seeing the number of street homeless increase from 836 to 3,079 between 1999 and 2008, the city came together to develop a comprehensive ten-year plan, released in 2009 and updated in 2017.<sup>5</sup> Homeward Trust of Edmonton is the designated community entity responsible for coordinating and advancing the city's plan to prevent and end homelessness, with the city government as partner and collaborator.

Homeward Trust provides guidance to other Canadian cities struggling to end homelessness. Soon after the release of the 2017 plan, however, Edmonton municipal leaders realized their own homelessness reductions did not meet their targets. As constant iterators, the Edmonton partners used this setback as an opportunity to enhance the strength of their approach. In that same year, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau committed \$40 billion to expand social housing and permanent supportive housing, allowing the city to deepen its housing-focused homeless strategy.

Houston, Texas is widely known as the US capital of oil wealth, as home to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and for having spawned an extensive system of world-class health care and research institutions. This city of 2.3 million, the fourth most populous in the United States, is one of the most ethnically diverse in the country.<sup>6</sup> Although the city has become more liberal leaning in recent years, strict

tax-and-spend limits imposed by state laws and local ordinance narrow the available range of public benefits.

Strong mayoral leadership under Annise Parker zeroed in on the homelessness problem in 2011. Despite making remarkable progress toward reducing street homelessness through the Housing First approach, city officials faced increasing public and business demands to curb an emergence of new encampments that seemed to pop up overnight. Mayor Sylvester Turner, who succeeded Annise Parker in 2015, agreed to intervene with programs that could permanently keep people safe and off the streets.

The city of Los Angeles sits within the larger county of Los Angeles, which is home to 54,000 rough sleepers who move across the borders of its eighty-eight separate cities toward large commercial centers. For years, local officials bandied accountability among themselves without any one leader taking hold of the challenge to break the action logjam. A regional quasi-governmental planning body, the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), administers federal homeless resources, but has struggled over the years with only mixed success. LAHSA directors found forging a successful partnership difficult to sustain.

Around 2010, a powerful alliance of civil society partners began to erode this persistent barrier. This collaboration was kindled by a philanthropic-nonprofit-business partnership managed under the umbrella of the local United Way. Led without a dominating ego, all responsible partners come together around a neutral table to work collectively to finally tackle the magnitude of the homelessness challenge within their midst. For this reason, a new hope pervades the conversation.

With almost 9 million inhabitants, the national capital Mexico City (sometimes referred to using the shorthand CDMX—Ciudad de Mexico) has ample safe and affordable housing. Over the past several decades, people moved into the capital region from other states, settling the city's outskirts in makeshift housing, often without running water and electricity, and only gradually being incorporated into neighborhoods with city services. Those living on the street, though relatively few, included preteens (among other runaway youth) and families with young children, which prompted considerable citywide efforts toward prevention.

At the same time, scarce shelter resources have been tied up in facilities that function essentially as permanent nursing homes for the elderly. In a

vibrant and thriving metropolis, these dynamics revealed flaws in the city's approach to serving youth and seniors. The mayor oversaw the CDMX Secretariat for Inclusion and Benefits, the primary agency providing adult homeless services, and the Secretariat for Comprehensive Family Development, which is in charge of preventing homelessness, particularly that of families. As the city received no assistance from the federal government, was underresourced, had little data on the problem, and lacked interagency coordination, Mayor Miguel Ángel Mancera convened an interagency workgroup in 2013 to develop a strategic plan for how to help homeless persons move off the street and to better articulate the city's vision and values. The mayor invested US\$35 million annually to fund the strategy that evolved from this planning.

The booming city of Nashville, Tennessee, has managed to reduce its street homeless population even as construction cranes on every corner bring in more hotels, shops, and downtown residences. Displacement brought on by development and the resurgence of downtown residential life has focused public attention on the challenge of keeping people housed or in shelters. However, fractured responsibility among city agencies impeded progress. The local housing authority—the Metropolitan Development and Housing Agency (MDHA)—had control over much of the regional funding and served as the lead agency and collaborative applicant for federal continuum of care dollars, and as sponsor of the community advisory board. But MDHA itself provided no direct service. The separate Homeless Commission provided community input to the municipal homeless agency, but with no influence over the MDHA or the continuum of care. Only after frustrations abounded and progress was stifled were these planning bodies consolidated to ensure a single unified strategy that would represent the full range of government players. The new Homelessness Planning Council, which serves as the continuum of care's governance board, has adopted a three-year strategic plan. With that, the city has moved from a bifurcated to a unified governance structure on homelessness.

Yet mayoral leadership is still key and, on that score, Nashville has stumbled. Rapid changes in city leadership have left the homeless agency staff to lead from behind in hopes of maintaining the goodwill of non-profit providers and advocates and motivating them to stay the course and act as a collaborative.

The most costly homeless services system in the world is installed in New York City. Driven by class action litigation from the 1970s that established the right to shelter for any person seeking it, New York City now shelters more than 70,000 people a night. Thousands of workers address the challenge with an array of prevention, shelter, and housing solutions with annual expenditures in excess of \$3 billion.<sup>7</sup>

The City's homeless system was designed haphazardly through a series of court orders and consent decrees stemming from the 1970s litigation. For more than two decades, judges, not mayors, had final say on what the city could and should do. The result was a system based on compliance rather than impact and innovation. Yet the magnitude of the effort, combined with a commitment in recent years to research and evaluation, has generated an evidence base for what works. These concerted efforts successfully ended the class-action litigation governing the family services system and has allowed the Department of Homeless Services to move forward independently for the past decade. The numbers on the street are modest for a metropolitan area of the city's size, yet solving homelessness remains elusive.

While the national government in France has the responsibility of meeting the needs of the homeless across the country, the problem, escalating in Paris, became a priority issue raised in the 2014 campaign of Anne Hidalgo for mayor. When refugees began arriving in 2015 from Africa, Afghanistan, and the Middle East, Mayor Hidalgo led Paris in implementing a 106-point plan to tackle homelessness. Thousands gathered at Paris's northern borders, living on the streets or in government-provided tents by canals while sorting out their immigration or refugee situation. Addressing this mass humanitarian crisis while not losing sight of those who had long suffered on Paris streets became a defining moment for city officials and citizens as they urgently sought to understand these new dynamics and prioritize actions.

#### HOW CULTURE PLAYS A ROLE

A factor that distinguishes cities discussed in this book is the language used when addressing homelessness and the underlying cultural frameworks

from which the words emanate. In Europe, the conversation is often rooted in the conceptual *right to housing*. In New York City, the *right to shelter* is legally enforceable, but not elsewhere in the United States; in other cities, homeless advocacy is rarely premised on any legal right to housing.

Latin American countries often refer to providing shelter and housing as tending to *individual human rights*. Embedded in these discussions about rights of the homeless are important cultural norms and practices. Unsanctioned settlement of land on the outskirts of Latin American cities has been common, with makeshift structures and an absence of such basics as running water and power. Over time, as these communities mature, municipal services are brought in and the land is de facto “ceded” to the prevailing group. This is viewed as the restoration of rights that the individuals lost when they moved to the city, rights that took time to regain. Included in this notion is a strong norm of homeownership and being grounded in one’s community. Rental housing is relatively rare. In the Latin American context, solutions to homelessness are framed as restoring human rights to dignity and a sense of community.

While European states generally embrace the “right to housing,” the words take on unique meaning across national boundaries. In Greece, rights and responsibilities reign heavily in family obligation. Housing is not only a local issue but a filial one, with family defined in broad terms. The tight structure of Greek support systems perhaps partially explains how migrants are not defined as homeless, even if they sleep on Greek streets, because these newcomers are not seen as part of Greek “family.” France rallies around the ideas of *la patrie, égalité et fraternité* (homeland, equality, and fraternity): the state will take care of its own. Although some contention surrounds who “its own” are, French values bar any distinguishing demographic characteristics from defining what is French. On the survey of street homelessness, for example, it was not permissible to ask about country of origin or race. Yet migrants faced significant challenges and discrimination, and constituted a good third of the wave of rough sleepers in Paris at the time of the city’s pilot street count in 2018.

In the United States the right to housing has never been a fundamental principle. US rights are viewed, instead, through the lens of freedom and opportunity. Americans’ rights are not attached to any specific outcome. In fact, the business of homeownership in rental markets rests mainly in



the capital rights to own, manage, and sell property. A diminishment of residents' rights to occupancy in recent years has been poignantly documented in the book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City*, by Matthew Desmond.<sup>8</sup>

Of course, these characterizations of rights across countries do not explain all the differences in levels or responses to homelessness. Rights are granted unevenly, and the face of homelessness bears evidence of broader patterns of bias and discrimination.

Cultural differences do lead to country-specific adaptations of solutions to homelessness and what it means to "bring people home." An even more tangible factor working in these modern cities is that they face similar national and global problems, which creates bonds that feed a sense of unity and common purpose among leaders and practitioners addressing homelessness and, at the same time, confronting the disparities in outcomes suffered by people subject to discrimination and racial injustice.

#### HOMELESSNESS, RACE, AND SYSTEMIC BIAS

The legacy of colonialism, slavery, land usurpation through western expansion, and the forced migration and assimilation of Indigenous peoples has left enduring scars on nations around the world, none more so than the United States. Across the ten cities highlighted in this book, these legacies remain glaring across the entire social spectrum. People of color and Indigenous people suffer discrimination from the time they are born, from poorer-quality health care and inferior schools to higher barriers to good jobs in the workplace and to accumulating such critical assets as housing. It should be no surprise, then, that the homeless population in many cities is weighted toward these social groups.

Although there is no biological basis for race, biases based on race persist, inequalities endure, and race categories continue to be used in public policy discourse. The conversation is shifting, however, and people are shining light on these disparities and acting to eradicate them. In the United States and Canada, explicit data are collected on a homeless person's self-identification based on race or ethnicity. By contrast, in Greece, Mexico, and Colombia, there is less explicit acknowledgement of these