

A BIBLICAL VIEW ON
Homelessness



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Homelessness



I finished speaking to dozens of listeners to the *Point of View* radio program at an event, and then took a break so people could write down questions for me. The very first question asked me how Christians should respond to the social problem of homelessness. This is a difficult and pressing topic in many parts of the country.

We may live in the wealthiest country in the world, but we still have high levels of poverty and homelessness. More than a half million Americans are experiencing homelessness, and most of them (70%) are individuals. The rest are people living in families (often with children). A significant percentage (40%) are under the age of 18. The highest rates of unsheltered homeless live in the Western states.

Many of the facts and figures in this booklet come from Michael Shellenberger and his book, *San Francisco: Why Progressives Ruin Cities*. He would describe himself as a progressive who has lived in the San Francisco Bay Area for 30 years. In the past, he has advocated for the decriminalization of drugs, affordable housing, and alternatives to jail and prison. He might be the least likely to write such a book, but he noticed

in his office in downtown Berkeley a growing problem with homeless people and began to investigate the problem.

While he and other writers address the policy issues with homelessness, there is also the important role that individuals and churches can have to address this social problem at the individual level. I would recommend the book *Same Kind of Different as Me* by Ron Hall and Denver Moore. Ron has been on our radio program both to promote the book and then the subsequent movie that tells the story of how his wife and he became involved in the life of a homeless man.

Reasons for Homelessness

Limited housing has been one reason for homelessness. In fact, expensive housing and warmer climates ex-

plains why homeless can be found in certain cities and states. It is possible to sleep outside for most of the year in California, Florida, and Hawaii. Not only is the climate warmer, but the real estate costs are very high.

Providing housing for the homeless has been a limited success in some areas. But homelessness advocates often discount the fact that providing such housing would create a magnet effect drawing other homeless people to cities that provide such housing. Many mayors and city leaders begin to feel they have an obligation to provide housing for anyone who shows up in their city.

Drugs and substance abuse are another issue. I might mention that Michael Shellenberger changed his views on drugs and drug addiction. He worked for the decriminalization

of drugs. Like many in California he voted to legalize marijuana for medical use.

However, he also documents many disturbing facts about drugs that have changed his mind. For example, drug overdoses are the number one cause of accidental death. Heavy drug and alcohol use degrades the health of homeless people. “People are not dying from drug overdose deaths in San Francisco because they are being arrested,” he observes. “They’re dying because they aren’t being arrested.”

He also notes this irony. “No state in America has taken more aggressive action to reduce the public’s exposure to chemicals, and to second-hand smoke, than California.” But while cities and the state focus on “the remote dangers of cosmetics,

pesticides, and second-hand smoke, they downplay the immediate dangers of hard drugs including fentanyl.”

Mental illness is another reason for homelessness. While some 52 million people suffer from a mental illness, about 13 million adults are seriously mentally ill. A significant percentage of them were released into society because of policies dedicated to the deinstitutionalization of psychiatric hospitals.

People with serious mental illness are more likely to be homeless, to interact with drug dealers, and to be victimized. Ultimately, deinstitutionalization became trans-institutionalization. A very high percentage of people in jails and prison are mentally ill.

There is good evidence that assisted

outpatient treatment reduces homelessness and incarceration. But there is also significant opposition from progressives for solutions like conservatorship as well as involuntary hospitalization.

Finally, homelessness is sometimes a lifestyle choice for people. They don't like rules and structure. Living on the street may not seem preferable to most of us, but there is freedom. One Harvard sociologist who acknowledged that a statement like "people choose to be homeless seems indecent" but then goes on to acknowledge that "the homeless are not just passive victims. They make choices, like everyone else."

Dealing with Homelessness

One way to address homelessness is to empower law enforcement. But that has become even more con-

troversial because of the “defund the police” slogans. The San Francisco district attorney, for example, won an underdog campaign against the city’s police union by promoting radical leftist ideas. His main goal has been de-incarceration. He is working to close jails or at least significantly empty them.

Social statistics from various cities show that effective policing reduces homicides dramatically and can bring order to cities adversely affected by homelessness. But there is massive resistance from progressive cities for law enforcement to prosecute drug abuse, vandalism, and assault in areas where the homeless are living.

Nearly twenty years ago, Joel John Roberts wrote the book, *How to Increase Homelessness* in which he

detailed the large and financially motivated homeless service providers, developers, union, and consultants. He had worked in this area to provide housing and assistance to homelessness. But he also noted that no one was talking about how dismantle the existing homeless service system after homelessness ended. Maybe many entities really didn't want it to end.

Also, there is the fear of retaliation. One chief of psychiatry in a public hospital admitted that if he advocated for "long-term residential secure psychiatric care," his reputation would be in jeopardy and his career would be over because of the activist left.

Tough Love and Alternatives

Christopher Rufo, wrote a Heritage Foundation overview on "Homeless-

ness in America.” He suggests alternative solutions that have worked on other cities. For example, he points to Houston, Texas, where Democratic Mayor Sylvester Turner adopted a “tough love” approach, providing services to the homeless while strictly prohibiting street camping.

During the 2011-2019 window when homelessness shot up in major West Coast cities, it fell by 54 percent in Houston. “Mayor Turner demonstrated an important lesson,” Rufo summarized: “City governments cannot and should not tolerate rampant street disorder, which is common in the major West Coast cities. This only incentivizes more homelessness and disorder, including large numbers of transient homeless who migrate to permissive jurisdictions.

Providing housing is another related

issue. Essentially there are two kinds of homeless: the sheltered homeless and the unsheltered homeless. The unsheltered homeless are those who are sleeping on the streets, while the sheltered homeless are those who are in shelters, or who have recently been placed in temporary housing.

Unfortunately, many bureaucrats and even many citizens believe that providing housing would solve the homeless problem. It won't. A study by the Manhattan Institute found what most of us suspected. Many of the homeless chose their situation to avoid rules and accountability. Also, they have preferences for the kind of shelter they will accept. Most would accept lodging at a hotel, but many would turn down the opportunity to stay at a homeless shelter, saying it was unsafe, unclean, or had too many restrictions.

Some of the homeless are in their situation to “game the system.” They have discovered that they might be on a long waitlist for government housing if they are in poverty, but they will find themselves on a shorter list if they are listed as homeless.

Biblical View of Poverty and Homelessness

The Bible classifies the causes of poverty into four different categories. The first cause of poverty is oppression and fraud. In the Old Testament (e.g., Proverbs 14:31; 22:7; 28:15) we find that many people were poor because they were oppressed by individuals or governments. If you are involved in a homeless ministry, you will meet people who have been taken advantage of or have been mistreated by government officials. They are living in poverty and on the

streets not due to their moral failing or mistakes. They deserve our help and compassion.

The second cause of poverty is misfortune, persecution, or judgment. In the book of Job we learn that God allowed Satan to test Job by bringing misfortune upon him (1:12-19). Elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Psalm 109:16; Isaiah 47:9; Lamentations 5:3) we read of misfortune or of God's judgment on a disobedient people. These impoverished people also deserve our help and compassion.

The third cause of poverty is laziness, gluttony, and addiction. Proverbs teaches that some people are poor because of improper habits and apathy (10:4; 13:4; 19:15; 20:13; 23:21). They also deserve help, but also need tough love to encourage them to

clean up their lives and follow a moral path.

The final cause of poverty is the culture of poverty. Proverbs 10:15 says, "The ruin of the poor is their poverty." Poverty breeds poverty, and the cycle is not easily broken. People who grow up in an impoverished culture usually lack the nutrition and the education that would enable them to be successful in the future. They not only need financial help, but they need training and counseling, and most importantly, they need biblical care and compassion.

In one of the most powerful statements by Jesus, he challenges us (in Matthew 25:42-45) to reach out to those who are hungry and poor. "For I was hungry, and you gave me no food, I was thirsty, and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger, and you

did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'"

Additional Resources

Anne R. Bradley, Arthur W. Lindsley, eds., *For the Least of These: A Biblical Answer to Poverty* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015

Ron Hall, Denver Moore, *Same Kind of Different As Me*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2006.

Christopher Rufo, “Homelessness in America: An Overview”, Heritage Foundation, February 16, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/poverty-and-inequality/report/homelessness-america-overview>.

Michael Shellenberger, *San Fransicko: Why Progressives Ruin Cities*, NY: Harper, 2021.



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