

**Serena Allen:**

Welcome to the Policy Paycheck. My name is Serena Allen. Thanks for tuning in. The Policy Paycheck was born from the idea that all people should have access to factual and relevant economic evidence about the most controversial policy topics we hear about every day.

While our intended audience is American high school civics classes, even policy experts may learn something from each episode. Ideally, listeners like you will walk away better informed to not only discuss, but also form your own opinions about the policies as taxpayers we already pay for.

On this episode, Dr. Gary Painter and I discuss homelessness. Dr. Painter is the chair of the Department of Public Policy at USC Price. He's also director of both the Center for Social Innovation and the Homelessness Policy Research Institute.

Thank you so much, Gary, for being on the podcast today. We really appreciate it. And we're talking today about the homelessness crisis, and that's particularly prevalent in California and right here in LA where we're recording. And so just to kind of start off, do you have any ideas on how this became such a large policy issue?

**Gary Painter:**

Well, I think that the reason it's a large policy issue is really the sheer number of people who are living on the streets who are currently unsheltered. Visibly, people are understanding that many other community members are now homeless. That's not something that people knew as clearly before, and so I think that's one of the reasons that it's become such a policy issue.

It's important to understand how we got here, and we didn't get here by accident. In fact, we created policies in really the late '80s in California in particular, but this is an issue in different places for different reasons. We really wanted to stop growth. Yet, California remained an engine of economic growth, and we just simply didn't build housing to meet the needs of a population that will continue to grow.

What's actually happened, which is so prevalent here, is despite the fact that we have, by some measures, one of the strongest economies that we've had, which means that people's incomes on average are going up. What we're seeing is that rents have been going up much faster than people's incomes over time. What that leads to is a huge number of people who are precariously housed, which is a primary determinant of becoming homeless. And that's something we could certainly talk more about.

**Serena Allen:**

Yeah, definitely. I wanted to start off with kind of focusing on some of the people experiencing homelessness. And according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, African Americans, American Indians and Pacific Islanders make up a disproportionate share of the homeless populations with African Americans making up 40% of the homeless population despite only representing 13% of the general population. This imbalance is also increasing alongside rising homelessness. Why is this happening? Why is it people of color that are disproportionately homeless?

**Gary Painter:**

Well, I think, to your point, it's actually two particular populations, indigenous populations and black people experiencing homelessness that are the most disproportionate. Immigrants from Asia broadly, immigrants from Latin America, those populations are not necessarily in some places disproportionately represented. I think it's important to focus on kind of those populations, indigenous populations and African Americans in particular.

The simple two-word answer is structural racism, but we need to actually break that down to understand why is it the case that these populations are so vulnerable. And so we know the long histories in the United States of continuously to exclude these populations, forcibly removing indigenous populations from land. Post-slavery, Jim Crow, etc, etc, etc.

But in the areas like for example that I do research in, it's just overwhelming. In some cases, like in the housing market, there's the proverb that says, "Death by a thousand cuts." Well, what happens in the housing market for African Americans has been documented over and over again that they're just slightly less likely to, at the very beginning of the process, that they send out, "I want to rent an apartment," to even get a response from a landlord.

If they do get a response from a landlord, then they were asked to provide additional income verification than other populations. I could continue to kind of walk you through at least 10 different places in the kind of rental process where there's disproportionate impact on African Americans who are there.

What that does is whether it's 2% more here of discrimination, 5% there, etc, etc, it adds up to a lot. And the same thing is true in labor markets. And of course, if we're talking about homelessness and you see disproportionality with respect to treatment in terms of people's ability to earn income, and you see higher costs to find housing, then that is just two of the sources. Kind of in the two word, structural racism.

Encompasses just this fact where the systems that are embedded right now continue to really damage people who are African American. We don't have in Los Angeles as many people who are indigenous, and so we don't see the raw numbers exceedingly high, but the disproportionality is still there. Whereas other parts of the country, you see much more stark numbers of people who are indigenous to the US experiencing homelessness.

**Serena Allen:**

Wow. Yeah, it's very interesting. I'm curious about a lot of things about how that happens, but just overall, I think people in general view housing specifically as a very partisan issue that there's some people believe strongly, that there's a human right to housing that it should be provided by the state. And some people believe that it's kind of the plight of the average person to secure their own housing if they want to be in housing.

I wanted to look closer, kind of escape some of the just the opinion matters of it and look more at the economic cost of it. I'm just wondering how much you know about the cost of the state to provide housing versus basically just letting people stay out on the street, if that's what they choose to do.

**Gary Painter:**

Well, I think that we know for some subpopulations what the costs are in terms of their accessing emergency services and those kinds of things, especially if they have multiple challenges. They may suffer from a mental health condition. They may have an addiction issue. They may have other issues while they're on the streets.

There have been a number of studies that have actually documented that the cost for some of the chronically homeless who are living on the streets versus taking those people and putting them in housing and providing what we call permanent supportive housing actually turned out to be fairly equivalent.

In that context, the cost of not doing something is at least as great as the cost of doing something. And of course, the human cost are much greater. Those studies are only looking at the short run. What we also know is that in the long run, the longer people live on the streets, the more challenges they have either in terms of human cost and/or their ability to reconnect into society.

I think it's pretty safe to say that those folks not only financially benefit systems, if you house them stably but also long term, you're going to provide a real benefit to society more broadly.

I think we know a little bit less about people who are purely becoming homeless for economic reasons. That is a phenomenon that's really spiked here in the western parts of the US. For instance, in Los Angeles, last year, the demographic survey of people experiencing homelessness identified that 71% of the first time homeless said they were homeless for economic reasons.

They couldn't pay the rent. Now, they may not have been able to pay the rent because of this gap between what the rent was and their income was. They may have lost their job altogether. And so then that's a clear reason why they couldn't pay the rent.

Oftentimes, those people first show up on the streets living in their cars. Then if they find a job, they're able to move back into a place sometime down the road, but many of those people once you're in a car and that's your kind of residence temporarily, then you don't have access to enough stability to then secure a job, so it ends up being this really dangerous cycle.

Now, we don't know the impacts there, but there are programs that have basically started to be tried out over the last few years. One is called Rapid Rehousing where you have someone that really became economically homeless, and so you basically give them a rent subsidy for about a year and it can be renewed for another year.

Now, we're observing people who have come to the end of those two years, and the question then is, now what? And to your point about some people looking at housing as a right versus others who view housing as a consumption good that people have to trade off with other things, I think that we are of mixed kind of messages both federally, locally in terms of what that means to have housing as a right.

**Serena Allen:**

Definitely. Yeah. And you mentioned quickly about first time homelessness and living in your car. I was curious. I read a study a while back and I'm sure you know more on it. Most people view homeless people as chronically homeless as having been on the street for, I believe, it's a year or more something along the lines of that. But in reality, the majority of people are only homeless for a short period of time. Do you have any idea what those numbers look like and how many people are actually chronically homeless?

**Gary Painter:**

I don't have them off the top of my head and I think it probably, as you would expect, varies city by city and different context there. In a lot of public programs, for instance, you have ratios where 20% of people who are taking up various kinds of public assistance programs are those who are chronically there. And they may have multiple disabilities or other things that might kind of put them there was 80% kind of cycle in and out.

I suspect that you'd see similar ratios with people who are experiencing homelessness that at any point in time, likely 70, 80 even higher percent of people are those who have just become homeless for the first time and may not ever get to a chronic condition. Let's hope so.

But the challenge that we're facing is that it isn't that the housing market is getting less expensive relative to people's incomes, it's getting more. And so there's just huge system issues for these folks that might actually ... This is what we tried to avoid, which is why Rapid Rehousing has become instituted. Just people who could easily be housed on their own with a subsidy.

And so that really speaks to broader questions about if we believe that housing is a right, and we actually ... We have a Federal Housing Program that ostensibly says housing is a right, and yet we know that people wait for public housing or wait for their waits for Section 8 was the old name or Housing Choice Voucher is kind of the newer name is incredibly long.

We have a program. It's not an entitlement. We have it essentially just means it isn't fully funded. We're the lucky few. And sometimes it's only 20% of the population eligible. Sometimes it's 25%. Maybe in some places, it's a third, but if housing is a right and it's sort of a right, but you have to wait for that to kind of kick in.

Right now, we just have this weird, I guess, philosophical conundrum in the sense that we have programs that say housing is a right, but the reality is they're not meeting the needs of the broader population. And so we either have to decide at the federal or supplementing with local level that we want to cover more people who are really dealing with having to pay, let's say, more than half of their income as rent.

The Federal Housing Program says you shouldn't pay more than 30% of your income as rent. We know that in LA County, 60% of renters pay more than 30%. That's why there's so few that actually are covered because so many people are actually eligible based on at least that criterion. But there's also additional income criterion that are required there.

I think the stark thing to me is that 30% of the people in LA County pay half of their income as rent. That's 426,000 households in, I think, the 2017 census or the 2018, but that's an enormous amount of households who are paying more than half of their income as rent. Almost all of them have incomes below 50% of the area median income in LA County.

And so these are people who are poor and they're actually trying to scramble together to live somewhere. And to do that, they have to pay more than half of their income as rent.

**Serena Allen:**

I'm sure that 30% is particularly vulnerable to that first time homelessness type of cycle if they haven't already experienced it in general.

**Gary Painter:**

Absolutely.

**Serena Allen:**

I think it's interesting, at least in my opinion, and just riding around LA with some of my friends, a lot of people have these type of construed ideas that the people on the streets have been on the streets for 10 years, 20 years. Well, some have. It's definitely the minority of people experiencing that.

With the growing people experiencing homelessness, not just in LA but across the country, there's costs other than economic cost, right? There's social, medical, environmental costs that are also popping up. I was wondering if you know how the state is also trying to deal with these other factors.

Let's say you get into a home for example, but then your healthcare still wouldn't be covered or something along those lines. How do those different costs, how are they factored into as far as homelessness policy and addressing those?

**Gary Painter:**

There are some, I guess, glimmers of hope in terms of the coordination between cities, counties and the state as it relates to thinking about what are the full set of needs that people who are experiencing homelessness might face. Because of the incomes of people experiencing homelessness, they're typically eligible for Medi-Cal. They're typically eligible for county medical services of a variety of kinds. Really, what it takes is connecting them to what they might be eligible for, and really having a deep understanding of what it is that they could get.

To the point of one of your earlier questions about why there's disproportionality among particularly indigenous populations and African Americans. Because they've experienced lots of discrimination of all sorts of kinds and even though I only reviewed labor market and housing market, there is a fair amount of distress with the systems that have actually disadvantaged them over and over again.

There are some times where people aren't getting the services or they're afraid to get the services, or what might be the case, especially in a place like Los Angeles County where we've seen a recent spike up in home ownership among the Latinx population. That people who are perhaps in mixed status families are starting to become fearful for those who may not have authorization, even though other family members do and some people might actually not be even accessing benefits that are available to them.

There's some real challenges with respect to outreach when you have some environments, which are kind of designed to exclude and then others who are working really hard to include and connect people. Those are the kinds of things that are easily fixed by good policy, but we have to recognize that as a political issue, sometimes policy makers are going to approach the problem differently because of their various constituents.

**Serena Allen:**

Right. Definitely. Going along with the cost associated with homelessness, I also want to discuss some of the criminal cost. I have two different questions on this. But our first is coming from our high school student feature for this episode, Megan Miller, who is coming from Columbus, Ohio, Upper Arlington High School.

And in Columbus, Megan did a ride along with a police officer who described many negative interactions with people experiencing chronic homelessness, stating all he had interacted with had a history of criminal activity. In my opinion, I think many people have a similar view that all homeless are criminals or something, and that's why they're out on the street. Do you have any idea how much of the homeless population has been charged or arrested for a crime?

**Gary Painter:**

I'm not taking a deep dive myself in terms of looking at those data, although they might be available. There's a lot of holes in the existing data for homelessness where we see people show up in some of our systems around courts and probation and so forth, but they may not show up in other systems.

One of the things that the Homelessness Policy Research Institute is doing here with a broad set of colleagues across the region is to try to work with the county to actually have better data integration. What we know from broader studies is that about, at most, one in three people have some sort of arrest in their past. It's likely the case that in terms of convictions and so forth, we're talking about people who maybe one in five.

We do know that something around that ratio, maybe 20%, maybe it's slightly higher have at some point in their past had some sort of justice system involvement. But again, it may not have actually involved incarceration. We also know though that people who have had those kinds of systems involvement do find that there are additional barriers to securing housing and also to getting jobs.

Those are the kinds of things that all of us collectively have to work toward working with employers, for instance, so they can appreciate what some are calling fair chance hiring

practices would look like that go beyond just simply ban the box or those kinds of things, but to think more integrated in terms of how do you discover talent from places that you may not have been looking before.

It's certainly the case at a percentage of the homeless. I suspect it's less than one in three who've actually had that kind of systems involvement in the justice system, but I don't know the exact figure.

**Serena Allen:**

Right, definitely. But one in three definitely is not all homeless people, which is, I think, an important myth to dispel. One of my questions is kind of the other side of that coin. I've heard of the certain laws targeting homeless people. I wonder if you come across any of that in your research such as you're not allowed to sleep in your car overnight or things along those lines. What kind of laws are there created?

**Gary Painter:**

Yeah, I think there's a variety of laws across the country and sometimes they fluctuate because cities, in many ways, they're charged with overseeing public space. They're charged with overseeing that public space for all of its community. Certainly, that includes people experiencing homelessness, but it also includes other community members, businesses and just pedestrians walking by etc.

They face this dilemma, in many ways, and I know they struggle with it and sometimes they choose a path that research shows doesn't help, which is criminalizing homelessness. Then others find paths where they're actually connecting people to services. Thinking about systematically ways that you do have to ... If homeless people are living in a particular place, you do have to actually make sure that there don't become public health issues.

And so you have to create processes there to say, "A week from now, two weeks from now, we're going to clean up this area, so that those people who happen to be living here now or in the future are not going to be exposed to any kinds of, I'll just say, sanitation issues that might be existent in those places."

What ends up happening in some places is that some cities are more careful about how they plan and how they outreach and those kinds of things that you have to do given public health issues. But other places are much more insensitive and unplanned in terms of what they're trying to accomplish. They just simply want to have homeless people leave. They may harass them, they may arrest them, they may do all sorts of things that in the long run actually ends up making it a lot more costly for someone to become stably housed. Issuing citations and the like.

Instead of, for instance, outlawing sleeping in your cars, one might imagine that safe parking programs would be much more effective. Where if someone is experiencing homelessness and ... Just for example in LA County, 37% of the unsheltered are living in their cars, so it's an enormous number. We're talking about somewhere in the range of at least



15,000. Because of the methodology in terms of how you're allowed to count people, it's quite possible that we have 25,000 people sleeping in their cars in LA County.

That means that those folks don't necessarily want to be there. They want to be stably housed. However, that's what they have to do right now given what's happened in their circumstances. Communities can either understand that people are living in their cars and could just be parked anywhere, or you can actually give really positive places for them to connect to services if they need it at the very least to have security, safety and hygiene at some of these safe parking lots.

You're starting to see and we've done some analysis of some of the pilot programs in California and Seattle where safe parking programs have become effective. You're seeing the governor now is looking at state land that might be available. City and county here in LA have been looking at lots. You're seeing more of those kind of popping up and some of the local churches and nonprofits who might have parking during the evening are starting to become involved.

That's the example of two choices. You have someone who's experiencing homelessness living in their cars. Are you punitive? Or do you provide a positive path and try to figure out how best to help those who are in your community?

**Serena Allen:**

Right, definitely. It sounds like with a growing problem, we definitely need some creative solutions to be able to try to rehouse people who are desiring to become homed. I'm also curious. I've heard a couple people seeing some things trending on the internet about anti-homeless architecture in the urban settings. Maybe a bench that's blocked off in a certain way so you can't lay on it.

But sometimes even more extreme where there's a place where a homeless person used to sleep that's like a concrete block or a sheltered rooftop and they put spikes on the floor. Have we noticed an increase in this architecture since this homeless population has been growing? Or is that just something people in my generation are just now hearing about?

**Gary Painter:**

I'm not seeing the data nationwide. I have not seen a spike in such architecture here in LA County. And yet, as you're alluding to, I have heard of that happening. Again, I'm trying to imagine the public space that citizens occupy in a city and understanding that there are some places where public officials would prefer homeless people not spend time as frequently as other places.

And so the real challenge, and I think the moral obligation is to figure out ways to provide shelter rather than just continue to kind of say, "Well, You might be out there. I'm not going to spend the resources to make sure that everybody who's experiencing homelessness are housed. But I assure, I'm not going to let you do it here or not sleep here and those kinds of things."



Again, think about if you spent the money to be that punitive in your community, could you have spent that money? Not anti-sleeping on benches architecture or something like that, but to actually house more people. I think that's where, again, the tension that a lot of communities face exists between their constituents who may not have a good understanding of what are the factors that cause people to experience homelessness. How those people who are experiencing homelessness are overwhelmingly likely to have been their neighbor in the period right before they became homeless.

Therefore, it's not basically pushing away your old neighbor to somewhere else is perhaps not in anyone's interest. I think if people over time understood that, then you would actually see more sensible policymaking than sometimes exist in certain places.

**Serena Allen:**

Yeah, definitely. It seems to correspond a lot to the ... I think it's called the NIMBY movement, the acronym. Could you explain that a little bit as far as you know?

**Gary Painter:**

Well, broadly, NIMBY just means not in my backyard, and it has typically been applied to kind of siting particular kinds of housing developments. The most common example has always been if you have a single family neighborhood, and then the city and or developer say, "It would be great to build a mixed use building here, so we're going to have 100 apartments right next to a single family neighborhood."

Oftentimes, the single family neighborhood residents will say, "No, not in my neighborhood, because we are a single family neighborhood and having an apartment building kind of throws off the fabric of the neighborhood." That's the typical case.

Where you see it more acute is people often driven by perceptions and racism think that what we don't want is, for instance, affordable housing in my neighborhood because people still have perceptions that having people who are more poor in their neighborhood will somehow negatively impact their neighborhood.

Despite the fact that there's a lot of research and evidence around kind of where new, let's say, low income housing tax credit projects are sited, actually if you're in the middle income neighborhood ends up improving housing values in the neighborhood, not harming them. Again, there's often as is the case of fear. Not necessarily grounded in empirical evidence or in really the value of human kind and nature and so forth that people aren't really addressing. That's Nimbyism.

If you go to the extreme, which is now it's not just about affordable housing, but we're actually going to actually put up a structure, either a permanent or temporary or interim structure to actually house our unhoused neighbors. Then again, people are thinking if they are following that track of mind not wanting poor people near them, then someone who's homeless is the most extreme kind of incarnation of poverty. You'll see, again, people say, "No, we don't want people who are experiencing homelessness in my neighborhood."

**Serena Allen:**

Interesting. You mentioned then about temporary housing. Could you explain a little bit for listeners who may be unfamiliar with the process of getting into a home, what would temporary housing be in comparison to Section 8 housing?

**Gary Painter:**

Yeah. There's actually a variety of names that have been used over the last at least 20 years, if not more names. The common name that people imagine around people temporarily being housed is a shelter. You may have a shelter where you have a bunch of beds and a common room and have some joint services, hygiene, etc, food, etc in those places that are provided.

There are often certain kinds of rules in many of the shelters about how people who are living there have to behave and what actions they need to take. Either in terms of supporting the shelter broadly and/or connecting to more permanent solutions.

The main reason that the shelters are there are people who just something horrible happened. They lost their house. They might be experiencing domestic violence. There could be a whole list of things where people feel not safe. Rather than being on the streets, they would go to one of these temporary shelters before they can get connected to the services, which include housing resources, but also might include other services that they may require.

The word shelter sometimes is now kind of used as transitional housing and/or interim housing. The idea and the reason that people are reframing and rethinking what used to be called shelters are, is to really point out that these are not intended to be places that people live long term.

In fact, in some of the places like New York City, there's evidence of people living in shelters for a year or two, which is absolutely not the point. These are places where people are in crisis, go for a moment. And then from that place, figure out how they can become stably housed.

That's kind of the infrastructure. What we've seen here in LA City is a program that's called A Bridge Home. A Bridge Home is intended to put a new interim housing facility in each one of the 15 council districts to recognize that everywhere in the city, people in the community in those each council district are experiencing homelessness and they're people in crisis who actually need an interim solution.

In the City of Los Angeles, they also recognize that in each council district, they're also going to build at least 222 units. I don't know the full history on why that nice alliterated number was actually proposed, but each council district is going to have at least that many units, of permanent housing.

The idea is, and I think everyone appreciates now based on the research and based on best practice that certainly permanent housing is the solution. Depending on the circumstances of the person, some people may need a lot of additional resources. Some people might need to be in sites, even boarding care if they have particularly acute health needs that are going to

require a particular kind of housing and supportive housing and housing that has linked to services directly. Whereas others may have just suffered homelessness because of economic reasons. What they really need is a subsidy in the short run until they can find full time employment or those kinds of things.

**Serena Allen:**

Right, definitely. Yeah, very interesting and a great policy on LA's part. They've been passing many things recently to try to mitigate this problem. I'm curious on focusing a bit more on exactly how homelessness affects youth, because most of our viewers and who we're trying to reach out with this information is primarily high school seniors, college freshmen.

I know that amongst youth, there is obviously a large percentage of homeless people are youth for some reason or another. What kind of programs at the moment are in place to help youth get off the streets and to try to get out of this cycle when they're transitioning out of their parent's home out of perhaps more stable housing via the foster care system or somebody else providing their housing into having to seek it for themselves?

**Gary Painter:**

Yeah, I think we see homelessness being experienced by ... and this is true beyond young adults and youth. For so many different reasons, they may be experiencing homelessness, so it could be an issue and we actually even see it here among some of our USC students that they are incredibly strategic and they are coming from a very poor family.

They might have done great in school. They may have gone to community college because that was very inexpensive. They see that by investing two years at USC, in so many cases, they actually might even receive a scholarship to pay for the tuition or a grant or something like that, but they don't have enough resources because it's hard to balance school and job to actually pay enough for housing on their own.

And so we actually see some of our own students experiencing homelessness and they typically sleep in a car or those kinds of things. You see a set of college students who are making that transition who are being just strategic and saying, "I need to save as much money as I can. I can get by at a university sleeping in my car."

Now, we all know that's not ideal and that provides a lot of risk factors for those students and we ought to think about creative solutions for people who are facing that really just tragic choice of, "Are you going to eat enough? Are you going to live in a stably house place?" That's one set of people.

There's another set of people who might be in crisis for one reason or another. They may have an addiction issue. They may have come out as LGBTQ or something that disrupts their place and their family. They don't feel welcome anymore and they're put out on the streets. That is something I don't know if we've seen kind of changes in the trends. I'm not an expert in the research there.

I certainly, even when I was of that age, had friends who did something to anger their parents and may have been kicked out and so forth. But I think what we're seeing broadly is that there are service providers that actually have sprung up that do target and have specific expertise for what are called transition age youth.

I think we're beginning to understand in many circumstances, for instance, transition age youth actually do better when they're housed in what we would call broadly shared housing. At the university, you might call that a dorm. We were very familiar with shared housing. Having roommates and those kinds of things.

**Serena Allen:**

Shared bathroom.

**Gary Painter:**

Yeah. That actually provides a supportive environment where someone who might be 35 years old or something like that and that shared housing might not be the right kind of solution. We're starting to see special programs around that here at the university.

Professor Eric Rice at Suzanne Dworak School of Social Work actually specializes in this population. He actually has developed a whole different screening tool that can help assess the needs of the transition age youth population.

With all that said though, just like the more general population people experiencing homelessness, there still do not remain enough resources to match the need for people experiencing homelessness. It's an opportunity to activate the community to really focus on any particular population but certainly those who are transition age youth.

**Serena Allen:**

Of course, I know right here at USC, some students just I think last year started the Trojan Shelter for their fellow students. I know across town that UCLA has something similar. I don't know the exact name, maybe Bruin Shelter. Maybe it's a play on words with bear or something.

I'm also curious for high school students themselves, what would happen if you're a minor? I remember reading something from Youth Emerging Stronger, or YES, that one in four approximately homeless youth are LGBT, in part partly LGBT community. What happens if you're under the age of 18? You're not yet away at college and you find yourself becoming homeless for one reason or another, what type of systems are in place to house you? Is it only foster care is the only option for you? What can you do?

**Gary Painter:**

I don't know, the broad set of resources and I suspect they're different from community to community, but certainly one of those doors is the Child Protective Services systems, which includes foster care and other connections to resources.

However, especially for high school students who kind of see themselves as almost an adult and so forth, oftentimes, they're fearful to be placed into those kinds of systems because of fear of maltreatment, especially if they are LGBTQ, or they represent another vulnerable population. Sometimes, their preferred outcome would be couch-surfing if there's anyone that's willing to kind of allow them to do so. And if that doesn't work, then what?

Again, resources based on evidence are starting to be deployed in much more effective ways. But it certainly is the case that not all our systems are fully versed. Like Child Protective Services and the foster care system were designed for a particular set of children and circumstances.

People who are experiencing homelessness for the first time for that system, for instance, if you kind of go back a decade or so, this was not something that the foster care system had often really taken on and appreciated what are those professional needs of those populations. That's where we're seeing improvement in those systems simultaneously with improvement in other systems.

**Serena Allen:**

Interesting. My final question is one that I'm posing to everyone at the end of the podcast. Throughout this, we've kept to a lot to facts and figures and just making sure that we're getting the information out, so our listeners can make their own informed decisions. But I'm curious, what's your opinion on how we can better approach homelessness from a type of nonpartisan lens in order to better allocate American tax dollars?

**Gary Painter:**

Yeah. I think that first, you have to kind of come to the realization that those people who are experiencing homelessness are likely your neighbor. Just like all of us, I don't know all my neighbors. And so if I see someone experiencing homelessness, it's impossible for me to know that.

What we know from the data, and then I'll move beyond the data, is that the likelihood of someone who is homeless in LA County, having lived in LA County is exactly the same as the likelihood of someone who's not homeless but living in LA County this year having lived in LA County the year before.

That perhaps was a long winded to say that you have the same likelihood. Essentially, what that rules out is that there's not a disproportionate flow of the homeless congregating in places that are not their community.

**Serena Allen:**

Interesting.

**Gary Painter:**

I think that's important for people to really wrestle with. Then when you realize that people who are poor are part of your community, people experiencing homelessness are part of your community, then you might think about those people a little bit differently. That's kind of as a starting point.

And then what we really have to think about, and this is perhaps a non-partisan way of looking at it, but it's not the only way that we ought to look at it is for those people who might want to focus on just cost and benefits, we actually have, as we referenced earlier, done analysis in terms of the cost and strains on emergency systems for people who are experiencing homelessness versus providing stable housing, so we know that.

We also know that there may, or I shouldn't say no, but I think we're starting to think that if we took what exist as a right to housing, for instance, which is not really a right to housing, but if you're one of the lucky few that get a voucher or get a slot in a public housing facility, you get stable housing that adjusts based on your income. But there's so many others who are eligible who don't get it that maybe we might want to take some of those limited resources and spread them out more broadly so that fewer and fewer people who don't have a subsidy now actually have access to something to help cushion when their incomes fluctuate.

I suspect given some of the research I did even as far back as my dissertation on the actual formal public housing in Section 8 programs, that those people if you broaden that appeal and there's other researchers that have done some simulations and so forth that actually might lead us to a better system, which actually cost less. Rather than having to pay kind of the acute cost of people experiencing homelessness if you spread out a broader set of resources to a community that provides more cushion for everyone, then you might be in fact better off.

I think that it is appropriate to start to think about it in terms of costs and benefits, but that can't be really the only way to kind of think about it. Because then you end up with conversations again, and that's where I started at, who are your homeless neighbors. They actually were your neighbors before of kind of devolving into us and them around issues.

When we're having our health care debate over the last 20 years here in terms of, "Do we want universal coverage? If so, how much?" And those kinds of things. There's a significant portion of the population who are already covered who go, "Yeah, it would be nice if everyone was covered, but I don't want to pay for it."

That's kind of how they view it, rather than thinking about it from a system standpoint where you actually might, in terms of our public systems that might net out in the long term. Especially, we know in terms of long term that kids who get are covered very well early on actually end up doing so much better in school and beyond in terms of their income and so forth. It has a huge, what we would call, rate of return in terms of an investment in healthcare.

I think we also have seen with some of the recent work that has been documented by Raj Chetty and the Opportunity Project, but in reality, theirs has gotten a lot of attention. There had been a ton of research by sociologists, economists, and urban planners, and policy students

for a long time that kind of really pointed to this, so that we know that people who are unstably housed, actually the kids don't do as well in school. And then again, there's these long term costs that people are facing.

I wrote a paper with a colleague at UCLA called Why Affordability Matters where we kind of documented the evidence of what do we know in terms of the individual impacts of increased strains of people paying more than 30% of their income as rent. And what do we know about regions that have more and more of their residents paying more than 30% of their income as rent.

When we look at those data, we see that there are ... For the region, you cause your region to grow less quickly and are more susceptible to economic shocks. It takes longer to recover if the economy dips. People have estimated what those costs are over 20 years.

I think what we haven't fully appreciated, and again, thinking about it from a nonpartisan lens and so forth is that in the short run, it might not always be the case that putting resources today for someone who's unstably housed would necessarily in the next year, pay off. But when we think about what we do invest, especially from the public side and what should be kind of that role of the public sector, most of what we do, you don't get the payoff in a year.

You build different kinds of infrastructure, more effective infrastructure. The payoff is not in one year. It's not in 10 years. It's over the long term. It creates a more effective system. The same thing is true in terms of providing stable housing, and thinking about how to do that.

You can imagine, again, smaller subsidies to more people. You can imagine renter's tax credits. You can imagine lots of kinds of policies that could be there that could provide some additional cushion for families that are pain, as I said, in the state. It's something like 1.3 million households that pay more than half of their income as rent here in California.

It's just an enormous amount of people that are facing what I call housing precarity. When you're in that situation, then you're just juggling your bills. You're juggling that. You might have to move frequently and kind of bounce around neighborhoods, friends, family, etc. We know that long term those investments pay off just like infrastructure investments. I think people need to think about that as well and not just the short term benefits and cost.

### **Serena Allen:**

You just heard Dr. Gary Painter and I discuss homelessness. Thanks for listening. I don't know what your hometown is like, but Los Angeles has declared a homelessness crisis. Dr. Painter provide a great insight on how this crisis happened and the costs on citizens if we do nothing.

If you enjoyed today's episode, be sure to check out our other episodes and share this one with a friend. To learn more about what Dr. Painter does or access more materials on homelessness, you can go to [bedrosian.usc.edu/paycheck](http://bedrosian.usc.edu/paycheck). Or you can also provide feedback or request topics for future episodes.

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