

Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative



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Violence Against People Who Are Homeless: The Hidden Epidemic

By Margot Kushel, MD on July 14, 2022



This week, three homeless people in New York [were stabbed while sleeping, one fatally](#). These attacks follow a spate of similar events across the country, including one assailant [shooting five people](#) sleeping outdoors in New York and Washington, DC this spring. In Los Angeles in 2021, [85 people experiencing homelessness were murdered](#), the highest number ever recorded. Violence against people without homes is a longstanding, if underrecognized, crisis. It is another disastrous result from a series of policy failures that have conspired to leave more than 580,000 Americans [homeless](#) each night.

Without a door to lock, people without housing are vulnerable. Dramatic cases drive headlines, but violence directed at homeless people is constant, mundane, and devastating. On top of that, due to longstanding effects of structural racism, homophobia, and transphobia, [Black and Native Americans](#), as well [lesbian, gay, and transgender](#) Americans are overrepresented in the homeless population. Furthering their vulnerability, the homeless population is [aging](#). As a physician and researcher who studies homelessness, I hear from patients who share how frightened they are—not just when there is a potential serial murderer, but every day.

Violence against people experiencing homelessness is not new. Ample research shows just how often they are victimized. A [2003 study of homeless adults in San Francisco](#) found that one-third of cis- women, one-quarter of cis-men, and almost 40% of transgender participants experienced physical or sexual assault in the prior year. These numbers are far higher than lifetime estimates for the general population. [People with mental health problems](#) are also much more likely to be victims of violence. In addition, a [study of homeless women](#) found that 48% had experienced physical violence without a weapon, 18% with a weapon, and 18% had experienced sexual violence within the past six months. In an ongoing study of homeless older adults, we found that almost 12% had experienced physical or sexual assault in the prior six months. Yet violence is not inevitable. [The study](#) followed participants for years and found that the violence continued; however, when people became housed, their risk of being attacked dropped by half.

Despite such violence, instead of focusing on safety for our unhoused neighbors, the misperception that people without homes are perpetrators, rather than victims, of violence contributes to both criminalizing homelessness and dehumanizing people without housing. Exaggerated attention on rare violent incidents that individuals experiencing homelessness commit (and emphasizing their housing status) leads to [policies supporting criminalization](#) of survival behaviors—like sleeping, sitting, and living in vehicles—while doing nothing to improve safety. Criminalization diverts resources, worsens impoverishment, increases incarceration, and [poses barriers to exiting homelessness](#). It also makes it harder for individuals without homes to report threats or protect themselves. Fear of people who are homeless, rather than compassion on their behalf, contributes to dehumanization—seeing them as less than and not deserving of our protection, care, or equitable policies. These fears, in turn, contribute to violence against people without homes—rates that appear to be [rising](#)—and lessen political will toward lasting solutions. Finally, the false perception of people who are homeless as perpetrators contributes to challenges in siting shelters and housing to meet their needs.

These recent violent events have generated concern and compassion [for the victims](#). Yet, we owe it to all people who experience homelessness to recognize that, while there may have been an isolated perpetrator for the most recent attacks, these were not isolated events. These events are an extreme example of violence against people without housing that takes place every day. This everyday violence is, in part, spurred by false narratives that stoke fear and frame people who are homeless as aggressors. We must reject those narratives and recognize that, instead, they are our friends, family, and neighbors who have been left behind by the [housing shortage](#), lack of funding for rental [assistance](#) for low-income renters, and the ongoing effects of [structural racism](#).

Until we create the political will to invest in solving homelessness, we need to look directly at the dangers our neighbors without homes face and reject solutions that sweep people out of sight or criminalize behaviors of people merely trying to survive. Housing ends homelessness. And, as shown in our research, [immediately reduces the risk of violence](#). True community safety will arise only when we end homelessness—not because it will protect housed Americans from their unhoused neighbors, but because it will protect those who are homeless from the everyday violence impacting their lives.

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