Opinion
Guest Voices



Pedestrians pass by a homeless tent adorned with an American flag across the street from the Los Angeles Mission in the Skid Row area of downtown Los Angeles Nov. 22, 2023. (AP/Jae C. Hong)



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Before serving several hundred unhoused persons on Skid Row, volunteers at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker Hippie Kitchen invoke the prophetic prayer of St. Vincent de Paul over beans and bread about the day's work ahead: "It is only for your love that the poor will forgive you the bread that you give them."

The first time I heard the words of St. Vincent, I was offended. Why should I be forgiven for serving the poor?

But over the years, the wisdom of the prayer has become clearer. When I hand out bread in a soup line, do I do so with a love founded on the conviction that the person who receives the bread is fully equal in dignity with me?

Moreover, do I do so with the conviction that the love of my neighbor who receives the bread is not directed at an "othered" human unit in the mass category of the "unfortunate," but at a real person who in their longings for life and love, in the words of philosopher Simone Weil, is "exactly like us"?

Lastly, is such an egalitarian love marked by a spirit of reflective repentance for what I have done and not done to create the culture and structures that fuel the poverty in which the poor find themselves seeking a piece of bread?

I thought often of my newfound appreciation for St. Vincent's prayer as I read the story of a society unraveling contained in the California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness. The report was released in June 2023 by the Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative of the University of California, San Francisco.

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Called the most extensive examination of homelessness in the United States in the last decades, the report deftly uses statistics and stories to show how on any given day 171,000 persons in a state with the fifth largest economy in the world are unhoused and caught up in scenarios ranging from living in a car to dying alone in a tent in the woods on the edge of town.

Upon its release in June, the report received extensive coverage for debunking common myths. The primary cause of homelessness in California is not a mix of mental illness and addiction (as conservative critics argue), but the lack of affordable housing.

"Higher rates of homelessness correlate with higher costs of housing," Margot Kushel, the study's lead investigator, said at an October presentation at Santa Clara University.

Moreover, nine in 10 of those who are homeless in California became homeless in California. The Golden State is not playing host to out-of-state legions hoping to sleep unsheltered on the beach.

Other findings in the study show the precarity of persons in the face of what seems like a tidal wave pushing them onto the streets. In the six months prior to their homelessness, the median monthly household income of a study participant was $960. At the same time, the average monthly rent of a studio apartment in the state was $1,400.



Tenants hold a community rally in the Baldwin Hills neighborhood in Los Angeles Jan. 8, 2023, urging that their buildings, home to 40 families and more than 100 low-income tenants, not be sold to investors. (AP/Damian Dovarganes)

One thing that goes wrong starts a slide to the street. The study tells the story of Carlos, who "experienced a spinal injury when he fell off a ladder at work."

> Unable to continue working and ineligible to receive workers' compensation since he was paid in cash, Carlos could no longer afford the rent for his apartment. As the leaseholder, he decided to vacate the apartment to avoid having an eviction on his record. He then rented a room in a two-bedroom apartment, but left after several months due to conflicts with his roommates. Carlos hoped that moving in with his sister's family would provide a long-term solution to his housing situation, but her family was facing COVID-related job loss and a shortage of space. Wanting to avoid being a burden to his family and without other options, Carlos became homeless, living in his truck. After receiving multiple parking tickets, his truck was towed. He now lives in an encampment in a park near City Hall.

Who are the unhoused?

According to the report, Black (at 26%) and Indigenous (at 12%) persons are overrepresented in the tally of the unhoused, relative to the percent of their respective populations in California.

Moreover, 49% of persons in the study became homeless from a living situation in which their name was neither on a mortgage nor on a lease.

Another 20% of persons in the study became homeless directly from an institutional setting like a jail or prison. One person in the study described the free fall from jail to the street: "[They said] 'Thank you,' cut your bracelet off, and off you go. There's nothing. They don't know if you're going to go out and going to be homeless, if you're going back to being homeless, they don't — they don't ask any of that."



Maurice Palmer waits with his possessions as a homeless encampment is removed in San Francisco Aug. 29, 2023. Homeless people and their advocates say crackdowns on tent encampments are cruel and costly, and there aren't enough homes or beds for everyone. (AP/Jeff Chiu)

The average length of homelessness is 22 months. Twenty percent of unhoused persons live in their vehicles. In the course of encampment closures, one-third of study participants lost items like identification cards, cellphones, and medications — which, among other things, are crucial tools for finding housing.

Fifty-two percent of unhoused persons are unable to work due to issues related to age, health, or disability.

More than half of unhoused persons were assessed to have fair to poor health compared to 22% with a similar health status in the general United States population. Sixty-six percent of study participants reported mental health symptoms.

Such persons also described "how homelessness worsened their mental health symptoms through a variety of mechanisms, including inability to maintain medications that had kept them stable, lack of sleep, experiences of violence, and experiences of shame and stigma associated with homelessness."

One-third of study participants reported regular use of cocaine, amphetamines or non-prescription opioids.

> One study participant described the roundabout search for housing vouchers: 'You just stay on that waiting list forever and ever and ever.'
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Once you lose your housing, it's an all-but futile battle to get it back, Kushel said. On the one hand, the statewide housing supply numbers work against you. The study reported that California has "only 24 units of housing available and affordable for every 100 extremely low-income households."

On the other hand, things that could be helpful — like Section 8 government housing vouchers to help cover the cost of rent — are available in one county but not in another, or are all-but impossible to find.

One study participant described the roundabout search for vouchers: "You just stay on that waiting list forever and ever and ever. I mean, I stayed on it one time. My ex was on it. We both were on it, but she actually ended up getting picked for the voucher, but they never told her. And then they couldn't find her on the list. After she got selected, she went to go meet with them, and they couldn't find her on the list anymore."

Homelessness: Who benefits?

Consistent with St. Vincent's challenging prayer, the work of Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond suggests an approach to this fraying reality in which unhoused persons seem to live outside society and are blamed for doing so.

In a recent article adapted from his book *Poverty, by America*, he said: "The question that should serve as a looping incantation, the one we should ask every time we drive past a tent encampment ... is simply: *Who benefits?* Not: *Why don't you find a*

better job? Or: *Why don't you move?* Or: *Why don't you stop taking out payday loans?* But: *Who is feeding off this?*"

Desmond's questions compel us to consider our role in fostering the culture and structures that have left so many in California living by the side of the road. How have we benefited from single-family zoning that keeps the cost of housing high and the supply of housing low? How have we benefited from living in de facto segregated municipalities with lower tax bases — municipalities created decades ago often precisely to get away from perceived burdens of inner-city poverty?



A line of weathered homeless RVs stretches along a street as the sun sets behind the Los Angeles skyline Sept. 18, 2023. (AP/Jae C. Hong)

How have we benefited from federal tax breaks (like the mortgage interest deduction) valued at $70 billion annually while federal Section 8 rental housing vouchers valued at $20 billion annually have impossibly long lines of applicants and run out annually anyhow?

The writer Joan Didion had a sharp eye for the sentimental stories we tell ourselves that hide the actual, often destructive workings of society. Of course, she was best known for applying this eye to California. But a comment she made about New York City is especially apt: "Lady Liberty, huddled masses, ticker-tape parades, heroes, gutters ... eight million stories and all the same story, each devised to obscure not only the city's actual tensions of race and class but also, more significantly, the civic and commercial arrangements that rendered those tensions irreconcilable."

In California now, we tell ourselves a lot of stories: the late-baby-boomer autonomy-loving story; the Silicon Valley lonely entrepreneur story; the techno-optimist libertarian story; the rags-to-riches movie and music star story; the go-west-and-discover-yourself story; the immigrant pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps story; even the Napa Institute culture-war Catholic story.

But the unhoused person living on the street for two years has no part in these stories. We need a new story in which we are bound in love and justice to the tens of thousands of persons living and dying on our streets. St. Vincent: Pray for us.

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This story appears in the **Catholic Responses to Homelessness** feature series. View the full series.