



RESEARCH REPORT

Alternatives to Arrests and Police Responses to Homelessness

Evidence-Based Models and Promising Practices

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Executive Summary

Unsheltered homelessness is a growing crisis across the country. On any given night in 2019, roughly 210,000 people endured living and sleeping outside on sidewalks and in parks, in cars, or in abandoned buildings. In response to residents' and business owners' demands for action, cities often turn to punitive responses: issuing ordinances that criminalize homelessness, clearing homeless encampments, and arresting people for actions necessitated by living outside, like sleeping and lying down in public. As a result, people enduring unsheltered homelessness can become trapped in a cycle of homelessness and jail. And instead of solving the homelessness crisis, these costly, punitive responses are ineffective and can make homelessness worse for those experiencing it and for the communities in which they live.

Two national crises have shone a spotlight on the role of police in communities, including how they address homelessness. First, in response to police violence against Black Americans, Black Lives Matter, advocacy organizations, and protesters have called for shifting resources away from law enforcement and toward community supports. Recently, Kurt Andras Reinhold, a Black man who had a disability and was enduring homelessness in Orange County, California, was killed during an interaction with two police officers who were part of a team trained in de-escalation and outreach to people experiencing homelessness.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way some communities and police departments respond to people enduring unsheltered homelessness, who are at particular risk of becoming ill. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued guidance in March 2020 that advised localities not to clear homeless encampments without providing housing to people to prevent further spread of COVID-19. Although some jurisdictions are still enforcing ordinances with encampment sweeps, others are decreasing police interactions. For example, after COVID-19 hit Denver, police interaction and arrests fell significantly among people who were experiencing long-term homelessness and had previously experienced frequent arrests. These disruptions provide an opportunity for jurisdictions to recognize that punitive responses are not working and permanently change how they address homelessness.

Some communities have already started to permanently shift from a punitive approach to a supportive one. This report highlights some of those examples. We also examine the connection between unsheltered homelessness and the criminal legal system, explore the negative social and monetary costs of using punitive approaches, and review the evidence around the following nonpunitive responses to unsheltered homelessness.

- **Connections to housing:** Housing First, an evidence-based strategy that has been proven to help people stay in housing and improve their quality of life, is a more cost-effective tool than citations, arrests, and incarceration. Housing First is built on the idea that people need safe, secure, affordable, and permanent housing before they can work on other challenges to stability. Permanent supportive housing and rapid re-housing programs are typically implemented with a Housing First approach and show positive outcomes for participants.
- **Inclusive management of public space:** Restrictive ordinances seek to remove people who are homeless from public spaces through encampment sweeps, citations, and “move along” orders. Inclusive management of public spaces does the opposite by seeking to accommodate everyone’s needs within a public health framework, such as providing access to drinking water, public restrooms, and safe needle disposal. These practices regulate public space and manage conflict to ensure that all users have access, including people who are unsheltered.
- **Shifting the role of law enforcement:** Partnerships with service providers can shift the role of law enforcement from policing homelessness to solving homelessness. Strategies include specialized law enforcement responses, co-responder models, and non-law-enforcement responses, all of which can serve as links to Housing First providers or other services and help reduce the number of incidents that result in arrest.

Although the evidence for some of these interventions is limited, they are promising innovations that could improve outcomes for people enduring unsheltered homelessness and for communities as a whole. Amid a pandemic and a national reexamination of the role of police, we have an unprecedented opportunity to more effectively address unsheltered homelessness, disrupt the homelessness-jail cycle, and set the stage for lasting systems change.

Alternatives to Arrest and Police Responses to Homelessness

As housing becomes less affordable and resources for community supports decline, unsheltered homelessness has been increasing across the country. Cities often use punitive responses—such as citations, arrests, and encampment sweeps—to address homelessness, but those responses are not working. In addition to being ineffective, police intervention and other justice system responses are harmful to people enduring unsheltered homelessness and can lead to a cycle of homelessness and jail. These approaches are also costly to taxpayers and do little to improve community stability and well-being.

But alternatives exist. The solution to homelessness with the most rigorous and consistent evidence base is housing, specifically housing provided through a Housing First approach. Housing First is built on the idea that people need safe, secure, affordable, and permanent housing before they can work on other challenges to stability. Until housing is available at the scale needed to end homelessness, communities can address the symptoms of homelessness by changing their approaches to public space management, policing, and enforcement. This report does not address all potential solutions to homelessness or for transitioning from jail or prison to the community; it focuses on those solutions that are most relevant to people who are experiencing homelessness and have frequent interactions with the criminal legal system.

Unsheltered Homelessness Is Increasing and Is Connected to a Cycle of Police Interactions

According to the most recent national estimate, roughly 567,000 people in the US experience homelessness on any given night (Henry et al. 2020). Although nearly 3 in 5 people experiencing homelessness are counted in major cities and urban areas, people in suburban and rural areas also struggle with homelessness. Most people enduring homelessness are sheltered, meaning that they live in temporary accommodations provided by the community. However, more than a third are unsheltered, meaning that they live on sidewalks, in parks, in cars or recreational vehicles, in abandoned buildings, or in other places not meant for human habitation. Compared with people who experience homelessness in shelters, individuals who live outside experience longer durations of homelessness, are more likely to experience physical trauma, and are less likely to be engaged in services (Batko, Oneto,

and Shroyer, forthcoming). They are also more likely to interact with police as a result of living outside, and those encounters lead to involvement with the criminal legal system. Additionally, the number of people enduring unsheltered homelessness is increasing as public demand for restrictions on how people can use outdoor spaces grows, a dynamic that leads to the “criminalization” of unsheltered homelessness.

Unsheltered Homelessness Is Increasing

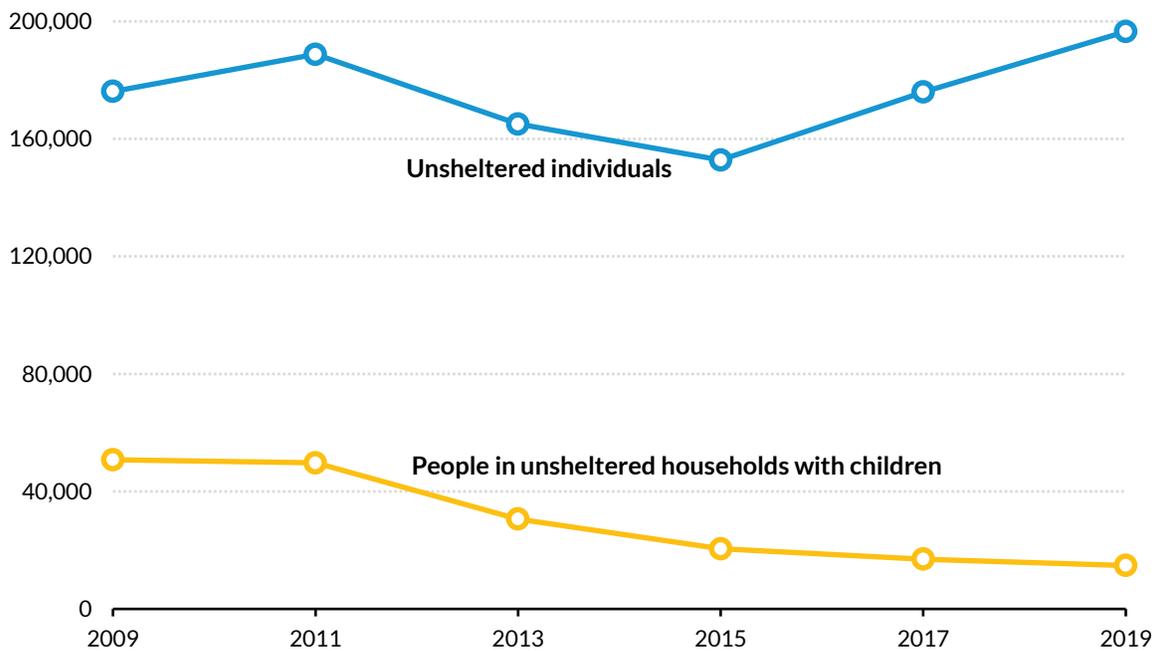
From 2009 to 2015, the number of people enduring unsheltered homelessness on a given night declined 24 percent. But from 2015 to 2019, that number grew 22 percent, from 173,268 people to 211,293 (Henry et al. 2020).

Most people enduring unsheltered homelessness are individuals—meaning they are members of a household without children. In 2009, 78 percent of the people enduring unsheltered homelessness were individuals; in 2019, that number was 93 percent. This shift was driven by a decrease in the number of people in families in unsheltered locations and an increase in the number of individuals (figure 1).

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on efforts to address homelessness have probably not resulted in a decrease in the number of people living outside. In response to the pandemic, the capacity of emergency shelters and other temporary housing was substantially reduced. This tightening of the temporary housing supply has been to some extent offset by communities’ providing hotel and motel rooms for people experiencing homelessness as a way to reduce the spread of the virus among this vulnerable population. However, the resources predominantly went toward isolating people with symptoms of COVID-19, and people who were unsheltered, unless diagnosed with COVID-19, largely remained outside and may have been joined by those who could no longer access temporary housing.¹

FIGURE 1

Unsheltered Homelessness by Individual and Family Populations, 2009–19



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Source: Meghan Henry, Rian Watt, Anna Mahathey, Jillian Ouellette, and Aubrey Sitler, *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Part 1: Point-In-Time Estimates of Homelessness* (Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020).

Note: Individuals are members of a household without children.

That homelessness and its impacts disproportionately affect people of color is well-documented. Black and Indigenous people in particular are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness overall and among people enduring unsheltered homelessness (table 1). Asian Americans are underrepresented among people experiencing homelessness overall, but among those who do, nearly 50 percent are unsheltered. The US Census Bureau does not collect gender identity information, so how transgender and gender nonconforming people are represented among people experiencing homelessness is unknown. But we do know that 2 in 3 transgender people experiencing homelessness and 3 in 4 gender nonconforming people experiencing homelessness do so in unsheltered locations (Henry et al. 2020).

TABLE 1

Select Characteristics of People Enduring Unsheltered Homelessness, 2019

Demographic group	US population (%)	Population experiencing homelessness (%)	Population enduring unsheltered homelessness (%)
Race			
White	76.3	47.7	56.6
Black	13.4	39.8	26.7
Asian	5.9	1.3	1.6
Native American	1.3	3.2	4.7
Pacific Islander	0.2	1.6	2.5
Multiple races	2.8	6.5	7.9
Ethnicity			
Non-Hispanic/Latinx	81.5	78.0	77.2
Hispanic/Latinx	18.5	22.0	22.8
Gender identity			
Transgender	—	0.6	1.0
Gender nonconforming	—	0.2	0.5

Sources: Meghan Henry, Rian Watt, Anna Mahathey, Jillian Ouellette, and Aubrey Sitler, *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress. Part 1: Point-In-Time Estimates of Homelessness* (Washington, DC: US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2020); “QuickFacts, 2019: United States,” US Census Bureau, accessed October 9, 2020, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/US/PST045219>.

This disproportionality is in part a result of the racism and discrimination embedded in the housing market and other systems, including the employment and criminal legal systems (Paul et al. 2020). But it also could be a result of the policies and activities of homeless assistance programs. For example, discrimination against transgender and gender nonconforming people in shelters and other temporary housing programs could result in their living outside more frequently than other people experiencing homelessness (Kattari and Begun 2017). In another example, the tendency to site temporary housing in high-poverty neighborhoods and communities of color may account for higher proportions of people of color among the sheltered and transitionally housed populations than among the unsheltered population (Metraux et al. 2016), although Black and Indigenous people are still overrepresented among people enduring unsheltered homelessness (Henry et al. 2020). Another potential indicator of inequity in the homeless assistance system is the 2 percent decrease in homelessness among veterans from 2018 to 2019 (the continuation of a downward trend that began in 2010), a decrease that was the result of a drop in the number of white, male veterans who were experiencing homelessness. Over the same period, the number of Black, Latinx, and women veterans experiencing homelessness increased (Henry et al. 2020). What drove those disparate outcomes is unclear, but possibilities include disparities in program eligibility, program prioritization based on people’s vulnerability or the time they spent homeless, and the makeup of the group of people newly becoming homeless.

The Affordable Housing Crisis and Assistance Shortfalls Drive Unsheltered Homelessness

Unsheltered homelessness varies widely in scale across the US and is more pervasive in urban areas and on the West Coast. Higher rates of overall homelessness and rates of unsheltered homelessness correlate with a lack of affordable housing (Glynn and Fox 2019; Honig and Filer 1993; National Alliance to End Homelessness 2017; Quigley and Raphael 2001; Quigley, Raphael, and Smolensky 2001). In jurisdictions that have the most unsheltered homelessness and where unsheltered homelessness is increasing most drastically, measures of housing affordability—specifically, the number of units available to extremely low-income households (those earning below 30 percent of area median income) and the number of households with severe housing cost burden (those paying more than 50 percent of their income toward housing)—are significantly worse than national averages (Aurand et al. 2019; Batko, Oneto, and Shroyer, forthcoming).

Also, many people experiencing homelessness do not have access to rental assistance, which contributes to their inability to access and remain in housing. Only 1 in 5 eligible people receives federal rental assistance, a gap that was expected to grow before the COVID-19 pandemic began (Kingsley 2017). And people seeking assistance, including those who live outside with no alternatives, can be on waiting lists for years (Sally et al. 2018). The pandemic-induced economic crisis is likely to significantly worsen homelessness.

Other contributors to unsheltered homelessness include the availability of shelter and temporary accommodations and the policies of those programs. Overall, the US does not have enough emergency shelter and transitional housing beds to provide housing to every person experiencing homelessness, and those shortfalls are concentrated in the western and southern parts of the country (Henry et al. 2020; National Alliance to End Homelessness 2017). Additionally, even when shelter is available, people can face barriers to entry, including undesirable shelter conditions and restrictive rules—for example, prohibitions against bringing possessions inside and sobriety or medication requirements (Ha et al. 2015; National Alliance to End Homelessness 2017).

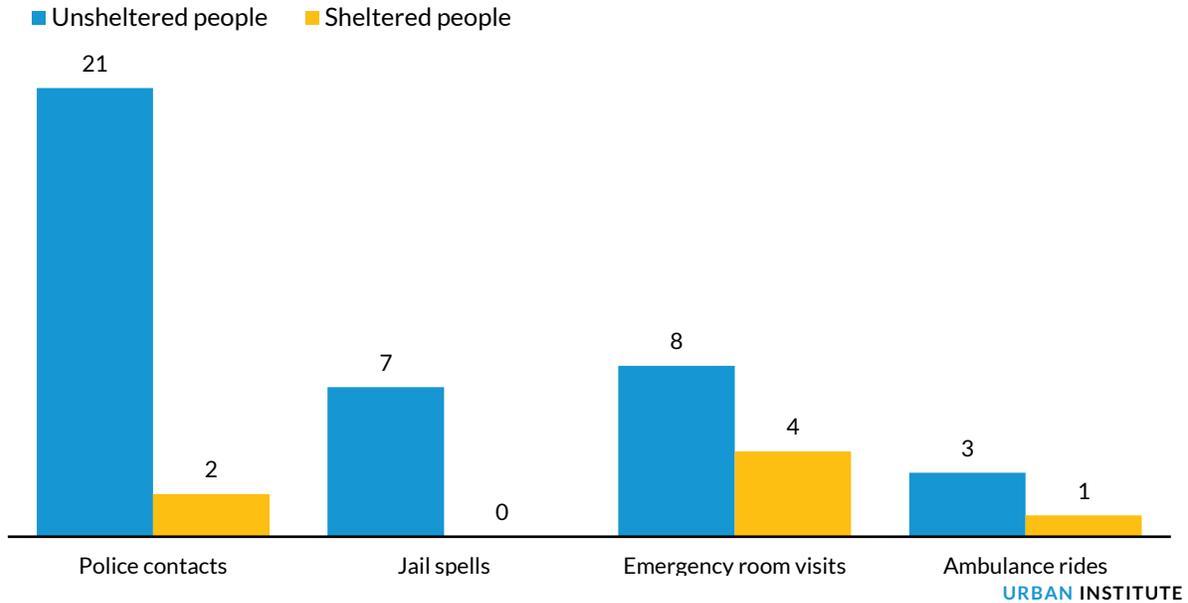
Living Outside Increases Interactions with Criminal Legal System—and Vice Versa

Research has found that people enduring unsheltered homelessness interact with police frequently. These interactions often lead to arrests, convictions, and time spent incarcerated (Linton and Shafer 2014; Rountree, Hess, and Lyke 2019). A recent examination of self-reported data (on the respondents' previous six months) indicated that people enduring unsheltered homelessness have 10 times the average number of interactions with police as people in sheltered locations and are 9 times as likely to have spent a night in jail (81 percent of unsheltered people versus 9 percent of sheltered people)

(Rountree, Hess, and Lyke 2019). The average number of jail stays for a person enduring unsheltered homelessness was 7, while the average for a person in a sheltered location was zero (figure 2).

FIGURE 2
People Experiencing Unsheltered Homelessness Are More Likely Than People in Shelters to Interact with the Criminal Legal System and Emergency Services

Average number of interactions in previous six months



Source: Janey Rountree, Nathan Hess, and Austin Lyke, “Health Conditions among Unsheltered Adults in the US” (Los Angeles: California Policy Lab, 2019).

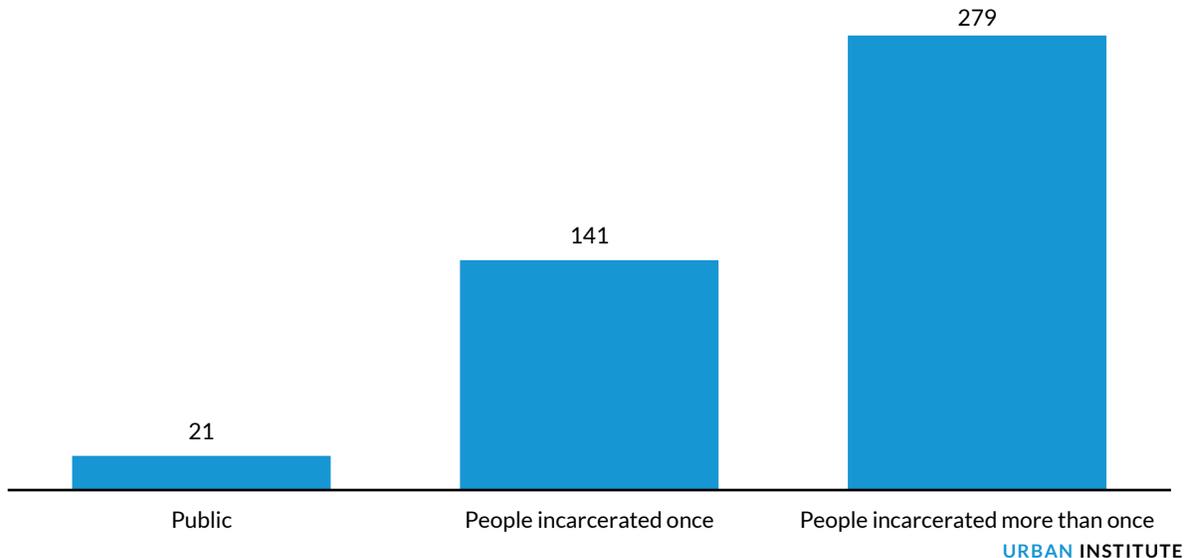
Notes: These data are from the California Policy Lab’s analysis of Vulnerability Index-Service Prioritization Decision Assistance Tool survey responses from more than 64,000 people who were older than 24 and experiencing homelessness in 15 states between 2015 and 2017. Jail spells are self-reported stays of one or more nights in a holding cell, jail, or prison.

The link between homelessness and involvement with the criminal legal system goes both ways: experiencing homelessness sometimes leads to negative interactions with police as people are forced to live in places not meant for habitation, and a jail or prison stay sometimes leaves people with no home to go to when they are released (figure 3). Breaking this link depends largely on communities’ ability to reduce homelessness, in part by stemming the flow of people into homelessness after they are released from jail or prison (either for the first time or as part of a cycle). The number of people who enter shelter directly from an institutional setting has increased over time, with more than 50,000 people entering shelter directly from correctional facilities every year (Henry et al. 2018). That number does not include the unknown number of people who leave incarceration with no place to go and begin sleeping outside or who enter shelter after a period of instability that follows their incarceration and release (Remster 2019). Incarceration and homelessness both disproportionately affect African Americans and other people of color, as well as people with behavioral health disorders (Metraux, Hunt, and Yetvin 2020).

FIGURE 3

People Incarcerated More Than Once Are 13 Times as Likely to Experience Homelessness as a Member of the Public

Number of people experiencing homelessness per 10,000 people in 2008



Source: Lucius Couloute, *Nowhere to Go: Homelessness among Formerly Incarcerated People* (Northampton, MA: Prison Policy Initiative, 2018).

Notes: Homelessness rates for the public are from the Prison Policy Initiative’s analysis of US Department of Housing and Urban Development homeless counts and US Census Bureau population estimates for 2008. Homelessness rates for formerly incarcerated people are from the Prison Policy Initiative’s analysis of the National Former Prisoner Survey conducted in 2008.

Complaints from residents and businesses to police or public officials are often precursors to interactions between law enforcement officers and people enduring unsheltered homelessness. Residents and businesses may also mobilize through organizations such as neighborhood associations and business improvement districts (Lee 2018) and advocate for measures that restrict activities like sleeping, camping, or lying down in public; begging; loitering; sleeping in a vehicle; or sharing food. These restrictions, frequently referred to as policies that “criminalize” homelessness, have increased in cities across the US since 2011 (Bauman 2014). One impact of this trend is that law enforcement officers are often called to situations that involve homelessness (e.g., conflicts over use of and behavior in public spaces), which can result in arrests, citations, or other coercive measures, or “complaint-oriented policing” (Bauman 2014; Herring 2019). People experiencing homelessness often have trouble paying fines and appearing for court dates, which leads to more fines, new charges, and bench warrants. These unresolved legal issues can result in even more encounters with the criminal legal system, including arrests and incarceration. This cycle has far-reaching consequences, creating barriers to employment and stable housing for people enduring unsheltered homelessness (Bauman 2014) and high costs for cities and taxpayers (Cunningham et al. 2019).

People enduring unsheltered homelessness sometimes form what are often referred to as encampments, groups of people and belongings. Encampments can be several people sharing resources, or they can grow to self-governing communities of several hundred people in an array of outdoor sites (National Coalition for the Homeless 2010). The location of these groupings is often influenced by local policies on the use of public spaces or by access to services and food (Culhane 2010; Herring 2014; Sparks 2009). In some instances, encampments can pose public health or safety risks to those living in them and to the broader community. When visible, encampments frequently draw concern from nearby businesses and residents, who demand that police and local government remove them (Metraux et al. 2019). In response to complaints, jurisdictions conduct “sweeps” in which they disperse people and remove possessions and litter from the public space, sometimes blocking it from being resettled. These sweeps can break the connection between people and service providers and as a result cause trauma, limit access to resources, and interrupt people’s efforts to build stability (Cohen, Yetvin, and Khadduri 2019; Junejo, Skinner, and Rankin 2016). Also, because sweeps are often conducted by or with the participation of police, they increase the likelihood that a person experiencing homelessness will have a negative interaction with police and receive a citation or be arrested. Recent calls to cease encampment sweeps to minimize the spread of COVID-19 have gone unheeded in some jurisdictions.

The most rigorous, empirical research on police responses to homelessness in San Francisco supports approaches that deemphasize direct police involvement; results show that people enduring unsheltered homelessness have experienced widespread material and psychological harm as a result of interactions with police, even when police policies emphasize alternatives to arrest (Herring 2019; Herring, Yarbrough, and Alatorre 2020). These findings contrast with assertions that policing programs that connect people to housing and services can generate successful housing outcomes, substantial cost offsets, and fewer criminal legal system interactions than traditional policing approaches. While plausible, these assertions have yet to be supported by rigorous evaluation studies.

It is important to note that people enduring unsheltered homelessness do not interact with police only because of complaints made against them. People experiencing homelessness often need the protection that officers can provide while simultaneously distrusting them. Being a victim of crime has been associated with experiencing homelessness in the previous year (Tsai 2018), but people who experience encampment sweeps without support for housing or services are likely to mistrust outreach workers or police officers (Cohen, Yetvin, and Khadduri 2019).

These interactions not only lead to poor outcomes for people enduring unsheltered homelessness but are costly to jurisdictions. For example, a 2016 report by Los Angeles County found that \$100 million was spent on homelessness-related activities, with \$54 to \$87 million going to law enforcement activities (Wu and Stevens 2016). In 2014, Denver reported spending about \$750,000 enforcing the

city’s antihomelessness ordinances, including bans on panhandling and camping or sleeping in public spaces (Adcock et al. 2016). Cities also spend thousands of dollars on efforts that use fences, bars, rocks, and spikes to make public areas less accessible to and less comfortable for people enduring unsheltered homelessness (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, these trends may have reversed some (box 1).

BOX 1

COVID-19, Unsheltered Homelessness, and Criminal Legal System Interactions

COVID-19 has further exposed the hazards of homelessness. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention noted that “homeless services are often provided in congregate settings, which could facilitate the spread of infection,” that “people experiencing unsheltered homelessness (those sleeping outside or in places not meant for human habitation) may be at risk for infection when there is community spread of COVID-19,” that a “lack of housing contributes to poor physical and mental health outcomes,” and that “linkages to permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness should continue to be a priority.”^a The guidance cautions against clearing encampments because it can have detrimental effects, including spreading infectious disease. Improving sanitation, especially by providing toilets and handwashing facilities, is a priority.

People experiencing homelessness are also at higher risk for severe illness from COVID-19 infection because the population is disproportionately African American. And many people experiencing homelessness are older and have chronic health conditions. Additionally, people experiencing homelessness are often unable to isolate or quarantine if they do contract COVID-19 because they do not have adequate housing. Homelessness during a pandemic means choosing between staying in shelters and other congregate facilities that may be poorly equipped to safeguard against infection and staying outdoors in unsheltered settings that have other hazards.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how some police departments respond to people enduring unsheltered homelessness. For example, after COVID-19 hit Denver, police interactions and arrests fell significantly among people who were experiencing long-term homelessness and had been arrested frequently in the past.^b These disruptions provide an opportunity for jurisdictions to recognize that punitive responses are not working and permanently change how they address homelessness.

^a “Interim Guidance on Unsheltered Homelessness and Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) for Homeless Service Providers and Local Officials,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, accessed July 22, 2020, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/homeless-shelters/unsheltered-homelessness.html>.

^b Between March 11 and March 31 of 2020, police had, on average, eight fewer interactions a day with people in this group compared with the same period in 2019, according to an Urban Institute regression analysis of 2019–20 Denver Police Department data that controlled for daily weather, day of the week, month, and year.

Evidence Supports Alternatives to Arrest, Rather Than Punitive Policing Approaches

Addressing homelessness through law enforcement does not work. This report highlights three categories of responses that more effectively and humanely respond to homelessness:

- connections to housing
- inclusive public space management
- shifting the role of law enforcement to alternative crisis responses

In the following sections, we discuss the research literature in each category and areas in which promising practices warrant further evaluation and research.

Connections to Housing

Whether people enter the criminal legal system from homelessness or enter homelessness from the criminal legal system, punitive approaches do not improve outcomes for individuals or communities. According to the evidence, only one solution has proved to break the links between arrest, incarceration, and homelessness: Housing First.

HOUSING FIRST: PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING AND RAPID RE-HOUSING MODELS

In contrast to approaches that require people to receive treatment for mental health or substance use disorders before securing housing, Housing First is an approach built on the idea that safe, secure, affordable, and permanent housing must be available before people can work on other challenges (Tsemberis and Eisenberg 2000). Housing First programs—centering the principles of choice, empowerment, and connection to social networks—give people a stable home so they can improve other aspects of their lives (Stergiopoulos et al. 2012). Although Housing First can be implemented in different ways, the approach is often used in permanent supportive housing and rapid re-housing programs. **Permanent supportive housing** combines long-term rental assistance and supportive services designed to maintain housing stability. People experiencing chronic homelessness (long-term homelessness experienced by a person with a disability, including a physical, behavioral, or mental health disability) often need permanent supportive housing services to leave the homelessness-jail cycle. **Rapid re-housing** provides people with housing search assistance, time-limited rental assistance, and stabilizing case management. Compared with other Housing First programs, such as permanent supportive housing, rapid re-housing is a short-term intervention (typically three to nine months)

intended to maximize the number of people who exit homelessness and stabilize in permanent housing quickly. When used to connect people living unsheltered with housing, rapid re-housing can minimize the time that someone spends outside and can lower the risk of increased interactions with police.

No studies have evaluated rapid re-housing's effects on criminal legal system involvement, but strong evidence exists that when it uses a Housing First approach, rapid re-housing increases housing stability. Rapid re-housing has been shown to reduce the time that people experience homelessness. And it helps people reenter the private rental market and retain housing without ongoing assistance (Cunningham and Batko 2018). People who receive rapid re-housing generally do not return to homelessness within two years and have better employment and income outcomes than people who remain without a home (Byrne et al. 2016; Mayfield, Black, and Felver 2012). Rapid re-housing is sometimes considered an intervention for people trying to exit a shelter, but it is also used for people who are living unsheltered. In 2018, more than 40,000 (nearly half) of the veterans rapidly re-housed through the highly successful US Department of Veterans Affairs Supportive Services for Veteran Families program were unsheltered before re-housing, and the share of veterans being re-housed from unsheltered locations has increased during the program's implementation (Silverbush, Kuhn, and Thompson 2018).² Rapid re-housing is a promising intervention for improving housing outcomes and therefore potentially criminal-legal outcomes among people enduring unsheltered homeless.

Permanent supportive housing, on the other hand, has been shown to decrease arrests and jail stays, in addition to increasing housing stability, reducing the time that people spend in shelters and experiencing homelessness, expanding access to health services, and improving people's quality of life. To date, several evaluations have used rigorous (though primarily nonexperimental) methods to analyze the impact of supportive housing on criminal legal system outcomes, in addition to housing stability. The quasi-experimental New York City FUSE II evaluation reported that over two years, supportive housing participants had 40 percent fewer days in jail, on average, than members of a comparison group (19.2 fewer days in jail) (Aidala et al. 2014). Similarly, an older quasi-experimental study in New York City found that supportive housing participants had 85 percent fewer days in county or state correctional facilities and 38 percent fewer days in local jails than a comparison group over two years (Culhane, Metraux, and Hadley 2002). In Seattle, the quasi-experimental study of the 1811 Eastlake project compared outcomes for housed participants and wait-listed control participants before and after the intervention (Larimer et al. 2009). After one year, the study reported an average reduction in jail admissions from three per person pre-housing to one per person post-housing and an average decrease in jail days from 31 days per person pre-housing to 18 days per person post-housing. The Chez Soi evaluation, a cross-site randomized controlled trial in Canada, found no difference in criminal legal

system involvement between participants receiving supportive housing and those receiving treatment as usual (Stergiopoulos et al. 2012). Further exploration of the Canadian criminal legal system is warranted to understand how the international context may influence these findings. Upcoming evaluations expected to contribute rigorous evidence on supportive housing and criminal legal system outcomes include the Denver Supportive Housing Social Impact Bond Initiative (final report expected June 2021) and the Los Angeles Just in Reach project (final report expected 2021).

In general, evaluations of supportive housing have not found that the model saves enough tax dollars to pay for the program. In some cases, evaluations have found cost offsets between \$12,000 and \$15,000 a year (table 2), primarily in public health care and corrections budgets.

TABLE 2
Summary of Select Supportive Housing Evaluations

Evaluation	Housing outcomes	Jail outcomes	Public cost offset
New York City FUSE II	91% housing retention	40% reduction in jail days	\$15,680 annually
NY/NY program	61% reduction in shelter days	38% reduction in days incarcerated	\$12,146 annually
1811 Eastlake	74% housing retention	42% reduction in days incarcerated	\$3,569 monthly

Sources: Angela A. Aidala, William McAllister, Maiko Yomogida, and Virginia Shubert, *Frequent Users Service Enhancement “FUSE” Initiative: New York City FUSE II Evaluation Report* (New York: Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health, 2014); Dennis P. Culhane, Stephen Metraux, and Trevor Hadley, “Public Service Reductions Associated with Placement of Homeless Persons with Severe Mental Illness in Supportive Housing,” *Housing Policy Debate* 13, no. 1 (2002), 107–61; Mary E. Larimer, Daniel K. Malone, Michelle D. Garner, David C. Atkins, Bonnie Burlingham, Heather S. Lonczak, Kenneth Tanzer, et al., “Health Care and Public Service Use and Costs before and after Provision of Housing for Chronically Homeless Persons with Severe Alcohol Problems,” *JAMA* 301, no. 13 (2009): 1,349–57.

JAIL IN-REACH MODELS

Jail (or prison) in-reach is an important component of Housing First programs seeking to disrupt the homelessness-jail cycle. In-reach seeks to connect people with housing services before they are released. Many of the programs identified as jail in-reach models worked to screen in people who were incarcerated at the time and met various other criteria (e.g., had no post-release housing plan, faced significant barriers to housing, received long-term sentences, and were eligible for community supervision). Implementation details, particularly for jail in-reach activities, were limited. Overall, the programs provided shorter-term housing assistance and case management and reported positive criminal legal system outcomes, in particular decreases in recidivism and new days in jail (table 3).

TABLE 3

Summary of Select Jail and Prison In-Reach Evaluations

Evaluation	Program model	Jail and prison in-reach	Criminal legal system outcomes
Los Angeles County Office of Diversion and Reentry's supportive housing program	Long-term housing assistance and supportive services	Identified and screened in people who were already sentenced and were preparing to be released and pretrial defendants who had pending criminal felony cases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 86% of participants had no new felony convictions after 12 months
Washington State housing voucher program	Short-term housing assistance	Identified and screened in people who were incarcerated at the time and did not have housing options post-release	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lower recidivism and fewer days incarcerated than a comparison group; estimated \$7 in corrections costs saved for each \$1 spent on housing assistance
Solid Start (St. Louis)	Short-term progressive housing assistance and services	Identified and screened in people with long-term prison sentences directly from prison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> n/a (only measured housing stability and social support networks)
Washington State Reentry Housing Pilot Program	Short-term housing assistance and wraparound case management services	Identified and screened in people who were incarcerated at the time and did not have a viable release plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Statistically significant decrease in new convictions and recidivism
Returning Home-Ohio pilot project	Supportive housing services	Corrections staff referred to a service provider people who had a disability (including severe addiction) and were homeless at the time of arrest and/or were at risk of homelessness upon their release	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participants were 40% less likely to be arrested and 61% less likely to be reincarcerated than the comparison group Participants had lower criminal legal system costs but higher mental health and substance use service costs than the comparison group

Sources: Sarah B. Hunter and Adam Scherling, *Los Angeles County Office of Diversion and Reentry's Supportive Housing Program: A Study of Participants' Housing Stability and New Felony Convictions* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2019); Zachary, Hamilton, Alex Kigerl, and Zachary Hays, "Removing Release Impediments and Reducing Correctional Costs: Evaluation of Washington State's Housing Voucher Program," *Justice Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2015), 255–87; Breanne Pleggenkuhle, Beth M. Hueber, and Kimberly R. Kras, "Solid Start: Supportive Housing, Social Support, and Reentry Transitions," *Journal of Crime and Justice* 39, no. 3 (2016), 380–97; Faith E. Lutze, Jeffrey W. Rosky, and Zachary K. Hamilton, "Homelessness and Reentry: A Multisite Outcome Evaluation of Washington State's Reentry Housing Program for High Risk Offenders," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 41, no. 4 (2014): 471–91; Jocelyn Fontaine, Douglas Gilchrist-Scott, John Roman, Samuel Taxy, and Caterina Roman, *Supportive Housing for Returning Prisoners: Outcomes and Impacts of the Returning Home-Ohio Pilot Project* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2012).

The following sections examine other strategies for responding humanely and effectively to people in crisis and enduring homelessness. Until housing is available at the scale needed to end homelessness, these other strategies can only mitigate symptoms; they not address the root causes of homelessness. Although we have more to learn about implementation through rigorous evaluation, the Housing First models discussed in this section are the only solutions with the evidence base to show they can meet the underlying need and break the link between homelessness and criminal legal system involvement.

Public Space Management

Politicians often face conflict over who may use public spaces and for what purposes, as well as pressure from those who want public spaces free of people enduring unsheltered homelessness. In response, local leaders must choose between ineffective, expensive, and punitive tactics that rely on enforcing restrictive ordinances and inclusive public space management (PSM) approaches.

RESTRICTIVE PUBLIC SPACE MANAGEMENT

Restrictive PSM strategies seek to remove people who are homeless from public spaces. Police enforcement of these restrictions includes encampment sweeps, citations, and “move along” orders, which could cause people who are homeless to withdraw, regroup, and reemerge to establish a presence in other public spaces. Because they have nowhere else to go, people enduring unsheltered homelessness “adapt and change to their urban environment” and “influence that environment in ways that shape a place” (Parker 2019). Restrictive PSM measures lead to a cycle of public calls for people experiencing homelessness to be displaced, outstanding legal obligations that can escalate into criminal charges, and further deprivations that prolong homelessness. This cycle is detrimental to those experiencing homelessness, and criminalizing homelessness does little to resolve public space conflicts and instead increases the costs of public systems (Cunningham et al. 2019).

Some communities have limited the use of public space through hostile architecture, unpleasant design, or restrictive furniture that aims to dissuade people from engaging in unwanted behaviors. For example, benches with bars in the middle prevent people from lying down in public (Bergamaschi 2014). In Boston, retaining walls, benches, and doorways are designed to prevent people from sleeping outside or sitting on sidewalks (Carey 2018). These approaches seek to control the use of public space but do not solve the problems causing homelessness; indeed, unpleasant design can make the problem more difficult to observe and address (Savicic and Savic 2014).

Many communities rely on restrictive approaches because they view policing and the removal of people experiencing homelessness from commercial and tourist areas as a strategy for economic

growth and development and are unaware of more effective strategies for creating stability (Bauman 2014). Quick-fix punitive approaches are politically expedient but can divert attention and resources from more effective, long-lasting solutions (Bauman 2014). Furthermore, in recent cases, courts have found that closing encampments without providing people living outside with an alternative may violate their constitutional rights (Kieschnick 2018). From a legal standpoint, considering inclusive PSM has become even more important for communities.

INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACE MANAGEMENT

Inclusive PSM practices seek to accommodate the needs of all people who use public spaces within a public health framework. Enacting inclusive public space policies that avoid punitive responses to homelessness could help improve parks, sidewalks, and trails for the whole community. Inclusive practices include picking up trash regularly and providing access to drinking water and public restrooms and showers or other hygiene and sanitary options, as well as ways to dispose of and exchange needles safely. A series of recently published briefs explored how inclusive PSM strategies could help create stability and positive outcomes for people experiencing homelessness.³ These case studies highlighted examples of inclusive PSM and human-centered approaches to addressing homelessness in nine localities. For example, in Santa Barbara County, California—where 27 percent of the homeless population lives in cars—the Safe Parking Program provides 133 cars with a designated place for sleeping, access to hygiene resources, and connection to rapid re-housing services (Arnold Ventures 2020c). The program serves more people than any year-round shelter in the Santa Barbara area.

These approaches could also improve outcomes for the broader community. Portland, Oregon, experienced a decline in reports about encampments after the start of a program that connects people in encampments to housing services (Arnold Ventures 2020b; Metraux et al. 2019). Inclusive PSM practices can also include hiring people who have experienced homelessness for outreach roles. This approach provides employment and could support exits from homelessness, although it has not been studied. Another inclusive PSM practice that has not been studied is outreach by law enforcement officials to support people forced to live outside in keeping their sites clean and not obstructing others' use of public spaces.

Inclusive PSM can also include providing services and support when closing encampments. For example, four large encampments of 200 people affected by the opioid crisis were drawing negative attention in Philadelphia in 2017. Instead of using police action or immediately breaking up the encampments, the city and community started a 30-day pilot program to engage the people in the encampments and connect them with services, including temporary shelter, no-barrier drug treatment, and long-term housing (Arnold Ventures 2020a). Because the city had resources to provide the services

in only two encampments, the remaining two were allowed to remain with a “policy of tacit acceptance” (Cohen, Yetvin, and Khadduri 2019).

The recently published case studies highlighted public officials’ observations that public education and effective communications around unsheltered homelessness were crucial to making inclusive approaches politically feasible, but policymakers struggled to find an effective public message. Although inclusive PSM programs are innovative and potentially promising practices, these initiatives have limited data on outcomes, which are likely difficult to measure.

Even though the impact of inclusive PSM needs investigation, some communities are advocating for more inclusive public health approaches in response to unsheltered homelessness. A grassroots movement in the Skid Row community of Los Angeles recently developed a proposal for ending homelessness in the neighborhood that includes increasing the amount of green space, adding sanitation services, and investing in affordable housing.⁴ Some studies outline the need for inclusivity in certain public spaces and share guidelines for practices like colocating social services in libraries (Giesler 2017; IFLA 2017; Provence 2018; Venturella 1991; Willett and Broadley 2011). For example, at Salt Lake City Public Library in Utah, three Volunteers of America outreach workers help calm patrons in a crisis and train library staff on this approach, and the library system has observed a drop in police and security calls.⁵ However, such practices have not been rigorously evaluated to determine whether they increase safety, improve well-being, and/or provide greater access to public spaces for people experiencing homelessness.

Alternative Responses to Unsheltered Homelessness

In contrast to the proliferation of punitive, coercive approaches toward homelessness, an increasing number of jurisdictions have established partnerships between law enforcement and homeless services organizations to address unsheltered homelessness’s root causes using housing-oriented approaches. In this section, we examine elements of this partnership approach and how such partnerships are implemented in various settings.

Alternative law enforcement responses to homelessness can be grouped into two types:

- specialized police units that take on all calls and activities that involve homelessness
- specialized police units that “co-respond” to homelessness

A third type of response, one in which service providers or social workers respond to homelessness, does not involve law enforcement.

SPECIALIZED LAW ENFORCEMENT RESPONSES

Alternative approaches to policing homelessness generally have roots in problem-oriented policing (POP), which works to address root causes—such as housing instability and unemployment—in areas with high levels of crime, or “hot spots” (Chamard 2010). POP discourages the use of arrests and citations in favor of less punitive approaches that focus on engagement and problem solving. For example, when addressing a homeless encampment, law enforcement officers are encouraged to work with community partners to arrange overnight shelter with housing services for people, instead of issuing citations under an anticamping ordinance. POP is a popular strategy with innovative law enforcement agencies, and initiatives that use the POP SARA (scanning, analysis, response, and assessment) model have been associated with modest reductions in crime (Weisburd et al. 2008). POP may in some cases help improve relations with the community, but evidence on outcomes other than crime reduction is limited.⁶

In some communities, law enforcement officials collaborate with service providers and perform tasks that more closely resemble homeless services than traditional law enforcement activities. These tasks include reaching out to people experiencing homelessness, prioritizing referrals to services over arrests and citations, and focusing on housing. In some places that have adopted this approach, police are familiar with homeless services-oriented approaches such as Housing First, outreach, temporary housing and accommodations, and inclusive public space management—and how they relate to POP approaches.

By offering support to people experiencing homelessness during encampment clearances like advance notice, storage of belongings, and referrals to shelters or services like low-barrier drug treatment, law enforcement officers and other outreach workers could build trust and promote well-being for everyone (Cohen, Yetvin, and Khadduri 2019). These efforts have not been evaluated, but policymakers and practitioners are starting to incorporate them into community responses to homelessness as promising practices.

SPECIALIZED POLICE UNITS THAT RESPOND TO ALL CALLS

In this approach, specialized police units take on all calls and activities that involve homelessness. This facilitates a consistent approach and provides specific officers as liaisons between police, stakeholders involved with homelessness, and the public. No widely adopted, standardized model for such units exists, but some data from early adopters—including Wichita, Kansas, and Colorado Springs, Colorado—point to successes.

The specialized unit that has received the most attention is in Wichita, where three to four police officers do casework that is usually the purview of homeless outreach teams (HOTs), in addition to having typical law enforcement responsibilities. The team responds to 40 to 60 calls daily via a dedicated phone number and 911. Only members of the specialized unit can enforce the city's anticamping ordinance, but as of the publishing of the 2020 case studies, they had not cited anyone for violating it (Arnold Ventures 2020d).

Wichita's HOT is based on a model from Colorado Springs, Colorado. In response to a growing number of encampments, the City of Colorado Springs formed a HOT of three officers to coordinate with shelters, advocates, and other service providers to connect people experiencing homelessness with housing and services. The city passed a no-camping ordinance and cleared the camps, but no arrests were made for violating the ordinance. Instead, the HOT and its partners connected 229 families with shelter, connected 117 individuals with out-of-state family members, and helped 100 people gain employment.⁷

However, the HOT approach has been unsuccessful in avoiding negative outcomes in some cases, demonstrating the need to further understand it and the training and implementation standards that would make it effective. For example, in September 2020, police officers who were part of a HOT in Orange County, California, killed Kurt Andras Reinhold, a Black man experiencing homelessness largely because of a disability.⁸

CO-RESPONDERS

In a second configuration, specialized police units co-respond with nonpolice personnel such as homeless service providers and social workers, and the law enforcement personnel adopt the approaches that service providers have developed (box 2).

The police in these specialized units are available to provide basic public safety functions; otherwise, they hand off situations to nonpolice personnel who are specially trained and experienced in such areas as homeless outreach, crisis response, and mental health (Krider et al. 2020). The Philadelphia Police Department's Service Detail is one example of this model. It responds only to homelessness-related calls and works with providers to connect people to services (Arnold Ventures 2020a). No outcomes data are available for Philadelphia's program. However, Philadelphia's Police-Assisted Diversion pilot program is a partnership between police and service providers that connects people with low-level offenses, which could include people experiencing homelessness, to peer-based supports.⁹ The program has referred 158 people to services since 2019, and 95 percent of the people who were referred accessed drug and alcohol treatment.¹⁰

SOCIAL WORKER AND OTHER NON-LAW-ENFORCEMENT INTERVENTIONS

In the final configuration on this continuum, homeless services personnel, instead of police officers, are dispatched to situations that involve homelessness (box 2). In Eugene, Oregon, the Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets (CAHOOTS) program uses a 911 system for reporting homelessness but dispatches medical and mental health crisis workers instead of police officers.¹¹ The program has not been evaluated, but after it began, Eugene saw a reduction in public safety spending that saved the police department \$8.5 million a year, on average, from 2014 to 2017. Out of 24,000 CAHOOTS calls in 2019, only 150 required law enforcement backup.

Some cities do not use the 911 system for homelessness-related calls. Rather than rerouting 911 calls, San Francisco; Philadelphia; Rockford, Illinois; and Syracuse, New York, encourage people with homeless-related concerns to call alternative numbers through which outreach workers are available to respond, instead of law enforcement.¹²

BOX 2

Cross-Sector Partnerships

Nonpunitive policing approaches rely on community stakeholders such as social workers, community organizers, and advocates (International Association of Chiefs of Police 2018). In 2019, two organizations outside the realm of policing, the US Interagency Council on Homelessness and the Council of State Governments Justice Center, collaborated on a detailed account of how police can collaborate with non-law-enforcement entities to better meet the needs of people experiencing homelessness. Where previous reports have stressed the importance of partnerships between law enforcement and homeless services, the joint report examines what “emerging cross-sector strategies” in this area look like (USICH/CSG Justice Center 2019, 4).

The City and County of Denver launched a cross-sector partnership in 2016 that uses a social impact bond to finance supportive housing for people experiencing a cycle of homelessness and jail. The Denver Police Department helps identify individuals who have contact with police and refers them to supportive housing programs. Housing service providers build relationships with law enforcement officials, judges, public defenders, and city attorneys to communicate their plans for supporting participants and helping them stay housed. The evaluation of this program is in progress, but early results are promising: as of 2019, 79 percent of participants were still housed two years after entering housing (Cunningham et al. 2019).

Research Gaps and Questions

Overall, the research literature provides compelling evidence on the impact of housing for people experiencing homelessness. Evidence also speaks to the benefits for people involved in the criminal legal system either before or as a result of becoming homeless, including greater housing stability and decreased involvement with the criminal legal system.

This review of the evidence, however, highlights several outstanding questions about how best to connect people to housing as an alternative to arrest and punitive policing approaches:

- What matters most for implementation of permanent supportive housing? How do criminal legal system outcomes and other individual well-being outcomes vary based on fidelity to Housing First principles, service models such as intensive case management versus assertive community treatment, or housing models such as scattered-site housing versus project-based housing?
- Does rapid re-housing disrupt the homelessness-jail cycle, ending unsheltered homelessness and reducing arrests?
- How did communities use jail in-reach models to inform unprecedented reductions in incarceration as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic? Where and how did communities work to identify people who had housing challenges, were incarcerated at the time, and were eligible for early release and coordinate their releases with housing providers? What jail in-reach models are more effective and for which populations?
- What does an antiracist framework look like for Housing First, and how can it promote racial equity among Black, Native American, and Latinx people, who are overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness and those who are incarcerated?¹³

Outside of providing housing, the effectiveness of other nonpunitive approaches remains uncertain. Those looking for evidence on which to base public policy and budget decisions may point out the lack of experimental methods, limited follow-up periods and sample sizes, cost offsets versus cost savings, and incomplete documentation of implementation. Questions about public space management and police enforcement responses include the following:

- What are the impacts of inclusive public space management on community members, use of public spaces, and people enduring unsheltered homelessness?

- What impact does training have on interactions between police and people experiencing homelessness and the outcomes of those interactions?
- What specialized police unit, co-responder, and alternative responder models have the greatest impact on criminal legal system outcomes, and what are their respective costs? How do people experiencing homelessness feel about these teams?

A growing number of jurisdictions is exploring ways for law enforcement agencies to rely less on enforcement-based measures in their responses to homelessness and to lean into nonpunitive, services-based approaches. These practices give communities ways to manage homelessness without arresting people or punishing them for being forced to sleep outside. The COVID-19 pandemic and the recent demand for police reform have already accelerated this trend, but encampment sweeps have continued.

As advocates continue to push for police reform, including defunding the police, localities may increasingly adopt versions of some of these promising models, removing complaints about homelessness (except for those involving serious crime or immediate physical danger) from police jurisdiction. Such a decoupling would be consistent with recent efforts—led by such organizations as the National Alliance to End Homelessness, National Homelessness Law Center, the National Innovation Service, C4 Innovations, and the American Bar Association—to identify and reduce the racial discrimination that is endemic to homelessness and is, in part, propagated by its interaction with the criminal legal system.

Notes

- ¹ Nicole DuBois, Abigail Williams, and Samantha Batko, “Temporary Hotel Placements Kept People Safe during the COVID-19 Pandemic but Will Not Curb the Growing Homelessness Crisis,” *Urban Wire* (blog), Urban Institute, August 12, 2020, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/temporary-hotel-placements-kept-people-safe-during-covid-19-pandemic-will-not-curb-growing-homelessness-crisis>.
- ² Kimberly Burrowes, “How Does Rapid Re-Housing Help Veterans Get off the Street and into a Home? An Expert Dialogue,” *Housing Matters* (blog), Urban Institute, January 23, 2019, <https://housingmatters.urban.org/articles/how-does-rapid-re-housing-help-veterans-get-street-and-home-expert-dialogue>.
- ³ See “Community Profiles” on “Research & Results: Nine US Localities Offer Human-Centered Approaches to Unsheltered Homelessness,” Arnold Ventures, March 5, 2020, <https://www.arnoldventures.org/stories/research-results-nine-u-s-localities-offer-human-centered-approaches-to-unsheltered-homelessness>.
- ⁴ “Skid Row Now and 2040,” Los Angeles Poverty Department, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://www.lapovertydept.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SRN2040Vision.pdf>.
- ⁵ Sophie Quinton, “Enlisting Public Libraries to Help Fight Homelessness,” Stateline, Pew Charitable Trusts, April 4, 2016, <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/blogs/stateline/2016/04/04/enlisting-public-libraries-to-help-fight-homelessness>.
- ⁶ “Problem-Oriented Policing,” RAND Corporation, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/tools/TL261/better-policing-toolkit/all-strategies/problem-oriented-policing.html>.
- ⁷ See “Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) Winner” on “2010 Goldstein Awards Winner and Finalists,” Arizona State University Center for Problem-Oriented Policing, <https://popcenter.asu.edu/content/2010-goldstein-awards-winner-finalists>.
- ⁸ Richard Winton, Anh Do, Gale Holland, and Maria L. La Ganga, “Affluent Orange County Town Roiled by Police Killing of Black Homeless Man,” *Los Angeles Times*, updated September 26, 2020, <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-09-25/la-me-homeless-black-man-shot-dead-orange-county-sheriff-san-clemente>.
- ⁹ “Police-Assisted Diversion: Overview,” Philadelphia Police Department, accessed October 8, 2020, <https://www.phillypolice.com/programs-services/pad/>.
- ¹⁰ Kelley Cofrancisco, “Diversion from Arrest Program Expanding to Kensington and North Philly,” City of Philadelphia, August 11, 2020, <https://www.phila.gov/2020-08-11-diversion-from-arrest-program-expanding-to-kensington-and-north-philly/>.
- ¹¹ “What Is CAHOOTS?” White Bird Clinic, September 29, 2020, <https://whitebirdclinic.org/what-is-cahoots/>.
- ¹² “Research & Results: Nine US Localities Offer Human-Centered Approaches to Unsheltered Homelessness,” Arnold Ventures, March 5, 2020, <https://www.arnoldventures.org/stories/research-results-nine-u-s-localities-offer-human-centered-approaches-to-unsheltered-homelessness>.
- ¹³ The Chez Soi evaluation explored an ethno-racial intensive case management model in the Toronto site (Stergiopoulos et al. 2012).

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