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COMMENTARY

California's homeless population includes people from all walks of life

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Unity is a priority for families, friends and companies. It's right there in the name of our country. Yet not all groups we create are unified or cohesive. People who are homeless are not unified, nor do they want to be. And they don't want to be seen monolithically either.

Whether people become homeless due to insufficient income, employment issues, substance abuse, domestic violence or other unforeseen reasons, each person is an individual.

At last count, California has [161,548](#) people experiencing homelessness, per the United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, but delving into San Diego's annual point-in-time count reveals more. The most recent San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless [report](#) from January 2020 draws these distinctions in "the homeless" population:

1. Subpopulations. The homeless community is composed of many different individuals who have been categorized into a variety of groups. Twenty percent are chronically homeless, 16 percent are in families, 12 percent are veterans, 7 percent are unaccompanied youth, etc. While there may be crossover in each group (such as female veterans), the groups are different and unique.

2. Race and ethnicity. Racial disparities are also evident in the homeless population. White people make up 71 percent of the unsheltered homeless population and 61 percent of the sheltered homeless population but 79 percent of the general population. Hispanics make up 28 percent of the unsheltered homeless population and 30 percent of the sheltered homeless population but 34 percent of the general population. Meanwhile, Black and African American residents make up 21 percent of the unsheltered homeless population and 30 percent of the sheltered homeless population but less than 5 percent of the general population in San Diego.

3. Health. While 10 percent of the county residents are people with disabilities, 58 percent of the homeless population is. Homeless residents reported a range of individual issues with chronic health, mental health, physical health and substance abuse.

4. Age. "The homeless" are not a uniform cohort of individuals all within the same age bracket. For example, 28 percent of unsheltered veterans were born in 1958 or earlier while in a week-long homeless youth count, 659 people aged 24 and under reported being unsheltered, sheltered or unstably housed.

5. Sexuality and gender identity. There were 11 different responses recorded when homeless individuals were asked to describe their sexuality. Compared with the general unsheltered population, unsheltered youth were more likely to identify as female, transgender or gender non-conforming.

The above examples provide an overview of the differences found in a population we too carelessly lump together. Speaking to homeless people, it becomes abundantly clear that, to paraphrase the Talmud, “Their thoughts and personalities are just as different as their faces.”

While we should all acknowledge the differences inherent in every human being, we should also understand the consequences of erasing people’s individuality and focusing strictly on their group affiliation.

Many “solutions” have sought to “deal” with “the homeless,” from busing them over state lines to devising hostile urban architecture such as intentional and otherwise useless handlebars on public benches, spikes on windowsills of buildings and loud music outside shops. These have failed primarily because they are a response to the general population’s outrage, not a nuanced solution to the real issue of homelessness.

Every locale is required to count its homeless population. Usually, it is done in the last week of January. Federal, state and local jurisdictions may calculate the homeless population differently. No matter what method is used, it is a concern that is increasingly difficult to ignore. Imagine if hospital emergency room staff responded to “the patients” as a monolithic group. It wouldn’t be just nonsensical; it would be deadly. Is this really how we want to treat “the homeless”?

Yes, people living in tent cities are hard to count. But that’s just the problem. We shouldn’t be counting tents. We should be focusing on each individual living in those tents. Public opinion varies dramatically regarding what efforts and policies will bring down the number of homeless persons. If we are ever going to address homelessness successfully, it will be because we address it in a policy, political and personal manner.

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