

OPINION

HELPING ON HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness in San Diego is entrenched and complex. What more can be done? Below, a University of San Diego professor, a college student and a high schooler discuss the history, the causes and the response to homelessness. Three related essays ran on Wednesday's Opinion page. Visit sandiegouniontribune.com/homelessd to read all six.

HOW INCOME INEQUALITY IS DRIVING THE NATION'S HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

BY DENNIS CLAUSEN

I sympathize with those who are concerned about the burgeoning homeless population in our nation's cities. However, blaming the homeless for being homeless often assigns blame to the wrong people.

The CEOs at Interfaith Services and Father Joe's Village, both of which deal directly with the homeless, have stated that their experiences taught them that homelessness is not a willful decision people make to avoid productive lifestyles. On the contrary, leaders at both nonprofit organizations attribute the homelessness crisis primarily to "economics."

In February 2019, financial journalist Andrew Keshner published an article titled, "America's 1% hasn't had this much wealth since just before the Great Depression." The subtitle states, "A new study puts wealth inequality in a historical and, perhaps, worrying perspective." Since the article was published, the nation's homeless population has increased substantially. The coronavirus pandemic accounts for some of this, but income inequality is still a major factor.

Signs of income inequality are evident everywhere. Jeff Bezos' net worth is estimated in the multibillions, but the average Amazon driver's salary was recently estimated to be \$34,000 to \$50,000, hardly enough to keep families housed in many American cities.

Employees in chain stores like Walmart are among the most poorly paid members of the working class, even though the Walton family has a combined net worth of more than \$200 billion, according to the Bloomberg Billionaires Index. This while Walmart employees earn an average yearly salary of \$31,618, and others in positions such as stock clerk earn an average salary of \$27,476 per year.

According to research by Carter C. Price and Kathryn Edwards of the RAND Corp., inequality in taxable income has increased substantially over the last four decades, thus transferring \$50 trillion out of the poor and middle class and into the pockets of the wealthy. Today, Wall Street and other wealthy individuals are also buying up homes and apartments, inevitably raising prices and making housing even more unaffordable.

This is not the first time America has encountered a homelessness crisis created by huge disparities in wealth. Income inequality today is the highest it has been since 1929, when the stock market crashed and the Great Depression gradually crushed the lower classes. Eventually, an increasing number of Americans were forced to live in encampments known as "Hoovervilles."

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I remember the stories my father and his generation told about these displaced farmers. They drove horse-drawn wagons containing everything they owned down dirt roads without any real destination in mind. Most of them had lost their farms to droughts or unscrupulous financial institutions. They often stopped to beg for food from the remaining farmers who managed to maintain ownership of their farms, although many of them would eventually join the ranks of the 1930s-era homeless.

Entire trainloads of displaced workers crowded into railroad boxcars to journey to cities seeking employment. When employment was unavailable, they too joined the urban homeless of the 1930s.

As I worked to recreate those depression-era hardships in a 1999 book titled "Prairie Son," I studied photographs and researched these displaced families. Like today's homeless, they sheltered in cities under home-made encampments constructed out of improvised building materials. They, too, were often threatened and under attack.

By 2012, I began to see similar signs on the streets of San Diego. Like their predecessors in the 1930s, these homeless were displaced primarily by economic factors, often caused by human greed. There were also growing signs of violence directed against the homeless. The San Diego Union-Tribune had many accounts of homeless people who were badly beaten, stabbed and even set on fire.

After reading these accounts, I decided to learn more about the area homeless and how they lived. At first, I was hesitant to approach them. I had heard too many stories about the violence that existed in the homeless camps. I met some who were clearly mentally ill and probably capable of hurting themselves or others. However, as Interfaith Services and Father Joe's Village reported, I learned that most of the homeless were displaced by economic factors beyond their control.

I eventually connected those stories to my other writing projects that discussed homelessness and poverty in the context of history and even biblical prophecies. This included Christ's message in the New Testament regarding the fate of the poor: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."

Yes, there are several factors that need to change if we are to effectively address our current homelessness crisis — but a good place to start is to consider building a more equitable society.

Clausen is an author and professor at the University of San Diego. He lives in Escondido.

CITY FAILING ITS MOST VULNERABLE

BY JOYA E. SAXENA

When my friends hear that I am from San Diego, they become excited. "San Diego is so beautiful," they say. "I've always wanted to go there. The weather is so nice and there are so many beaches and parks." They might even mention Balboa Park and the beaches in La Jolla, beautiful parts of San Diego that capture its glory. But San Diego is not all beaches and parks.

I don't blame those who romanticize San Diego. The kids I went to school with in Scripps Ranch professed their love for the city day after day. We see the slogan "America's Finest" on the side of the cars of the San Diego Police Department. Even my parents prefer living in San Diego to their hometowns in the Midwest.

However, many people are not aware of the serious problems San Diego has with housing and homelessness. In June of this year, Mayor Todd Gloria pushed for "progressive enforcement," which criminalizes unsheltered individuals for living in encampments. Meanwhile, the number of people on the streets has increased roughly 10 percent in just two years, yet Gloria continues to propagate the message that San Diego has a "deep well of compassion" for those suffering because of the housing crisis in our city.

San Diego's definition of compassion is an average rent of \$2,916 per month, according to RentCafe. San Diego's home value is \$950,455 on average, a 12.3 percent increase from last year. Communities of color are disproportionately impacted by redlining. If you go south of Adams Avenue, there is more crime, lower income and more diversity. Many people of color are forced to live in crowded, undesirable living spaces because they are disproportionately impacted by the wealth gap. San Diego recently surpassed Los Angeles and San Francisco on one list of California's least affordable cities. Certain neighborhoods, such as Logan Heights, are no longer affordable for lower-income families because

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of rising gentrification. The exorbitant cost of living forces these families to leave the area. Wealthier individuals from outside areas are displacing lower-income families in places like Logan Heights. This can be seen in how income levels in Logan Heights have changed since 2007.

Homelessness has many causes. One of them is the lack of affordable housing and poverty in cities. San Diego is no exception. As a

San Diego native, I have been to the encampments on 16th Street and Island Avenue, and I am angry at the city, not the people living there. We need companies to build middle- to low-income housing. When this happens, the population will become more diverse and welcoming to all backgrounds, regardless of socioeconomic status. This can decrease the prevalent segregation in our city. We also must prohibit large-scale luxury project developments in at-risk neighborhoods. These large-scale luxury properties increase the rent and home values, and the people have no choice but to relocate.

Aesthetically, San Diego is beautiful. However, the way the city is run is racist. The SDPD targets communities of color more than the White communities located north of Adams Avenue. There are nine police stations conveniently placed below Adams Avenue and five above. This causes people of color to be disproportionately overpoliced and punished for committing minor offenses. African Americans make up 13 percent of the U.S. population and 5.5 percent of the population in San Diego, yet they make up 40 percent of the unsheltered population in the U.S. and 21 percent of the unsheltered population in San Diego. These statistics indicate the unacceptable disparities in treatment between different races and ethnic groups in San Diego.

We, as a community, need to spend San Diego's city budget on mental health services, education, housing and workforce development rather than spending most of it on expanding the Police Department.

San Diego is a beautiful city to live in, but the privileges of living in San Diego are not given to everyone. We need to make San Diego a better place for everyone, not just the wealthy. I am tired of seeing people suffer because of a system that fails them. We must do better for the most vulnerable among us.

Saxena is a student majoring in political science and sociology at Beloit College. She is originally from Scripps Ranch.



EDUARDO CONTRERAS U-T

Shirley Ghassemzadeh of Blue Wagon Ministry talks with Snoopy Greene while distributing food and water in Balboa Park in July 2021, in an outreach effort organized by the Lucky Duck Foundation.

HOW LOCAL STUDENTS ARE HELPING THE UNSHELTERED

BY BRAYDEN A. PAPE

Homelessness is not a baby boomer issue or a Generation X problem; it transcends generations and affects us all. It will take all of us working together to solve it. The causes of homelessness are many — the rising cost of living, the lack of affordable housing, pandemic job loss and personal challenges. Do we stand in judgment or become a part of the solution?

I chose the latter. As pandemic restrictions were being eased across the county last summer, I started volunteering at PATH San Diego. I was looking for an organization that was focused on sustainable, long-term solutions to housing insecurity. PATH is an organization that literally takes people off the street and provides them with services and resources to help them get back on their feet and into a permanent home. My research led me to Sigrid Struben, associate director of community affairs at PATH San Diego. She has become my supervisor, mentor, and now, over a year later, almost a family member.

I founded the PATH Interscholastic Leadership Team, or PILT, after learning that PATH needed support to meet the increased demand for client necessities such as hygiene products, face masks, underwear and shoes. I contacted a few friends from middle school who I knew would be open to the idea of getting involved. Although we now attend different high schools, Camila Figueroa Sanchez, Lauren Rainey, Kiara Guizar, Kelly Easley and I were "raised" at

Albert Einstein Academies. There we participated in community clean-ups and walk-for-water events, and donated uniforms and clothes for unsheltered students. The pandemic was a call to action. We were ready. We were all in. On Aug. 20, 2021, the team was founded with the motto "Community, Collaboration, Compassion."

We started with two simple projects: hygiene kits for PATH's unsheltered clients and welcome home baskets for those transitioning into permanent housing for the first time. Pandemic-related supply chain dis-

ruptions, job loss and the rising cost of living meant that PATH San Diego was now supporting an ever-increasing number of clients, which in turn inspired more projects. That was when I started contacting other San Diego County schools to partner with us. As a result, Albert Einstein Academies and Saint Therese Academy (San Diego), EJE Academies (El Cajon), St. Martin of Tours Academy (La Mesa), Canyon Hills High School Key Club, Scripps Ranch High School California Scholarship Federation Club and Mission Bay High School Outreach Club adopted our projects, while nearly the

entire Helix High community started supporting our efforts through donation drives across all grade levels. To date, Helix High remains the biggest contributor to our projects.

I do what I do because my Associated Student Body director at the Albert Einstein Academies, Jose Diaz, gave me the freedom to be involved in the school's food drives during the early stages of the pandemic. Little did I know then that the confidence I was gaining through that activity was going to give me the courage to approach PATH

San Diego to start a youth group! Behind every Generation Z changemaker, therefore, is at least one empowering adult.

A little over a year later and the PATH Interscholastic Leadership Team has grown to involve nine schools in three San Diego County school districts. These clubs and schools support PATH by choosing one of our specific projects. Our projects mirror the wrap-around services PATH offers, and include support for outreach, veterans, seniors, therapeutic gardens and unsheltered pets. In partnership with schools, community organizations and businesses, the team

has donated over \$20,000 worth of furniture, raised over \$2,000, and provided over 1,500 pairs of socks and 2,000 items of clothing. Various campaigns have also helped us donate 1,300 items of cleaning supplies, hundreds of hygiene kits, about 30 "welcome home" baskets, 30 cubic feet of garden soil, weekly cafeteria food donations, and many items of new clothing for PATH's clients as well as supplies and vet care for their pets. We have also hosted three holiday parties for residents at several of PATH's seven supportive housing sites.

Anyone can join the fight against housing and food insecurity. The PATH Interscholastic Leadership Team offers students the opportunity to support PATH through one of our awesome projects ("PATH Pets" is a favorite). Adults could join PATH San Diego and volunteer their time, make in-kind or money donations or participate in fundraising events that benefit PATH. So there is something for everyone depending on their ability and availability.

A permanent place to call "home" is a fundamental human right. It is not just a word, a phrase or a cliché. Homelessness is real. It affects all of us, regardless of our present housing situation or where we live. Members of Generation Z may not have created the problem, but I believe that my generation has the power and the ability to do something about it.

Pape is a PATH San Diego volunteer and the founder of the PATH Interscholastic Leadership Team, or PILT. He is a junior at Helix Charter High and lives in La Mesa.