

THE STORY WE TELL ABOUT HOMELESSNESS DETERMINES WHICH SOLUTIONS WE WORK TOWARD.

Criminalization policies are built on pervasive myths about homelessness and poverty—some of which, interestingly, contradict each other and yet are still believed to be true by many people. Left unchallenged, these myths can fuel criminalization efforts and hinder real solutions to prevent and end homelessness. Advancing a better public narrative is a critical part of advancing better public policy.

Directly dispelling myths that arise in conversations about homelessness is the first step. The second is re-framing the conversation into a narrative that points to effective solutions. As you become more comfortable having these conversations, it will become easier to recognize how statements frame a conversation in one narrative or the other. You can reframe a difficult conversation by leading with values, such as “everyone should have the opportunity to live in a safe, healthy, affordable home.”

COMPETING NARRATIVES ON HOMELESSNESS



HOMELESSNESS IS A MATTER OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The personal responsibility narrative says people who are homeless got themselves into their situation through bad decisions, and it is their responsibility to get themselves out of it. This narrative excuses housed people from any responsibility to be part of the solution.

Common Myths:

“People choose to be homeless.”

“People who are homeless in my community come from someplace else.”

“Providing services only encourages homelessness.”



Solutions:

“De-incentivize” homelessness through criminalization. Restrict services (through sobriety requirements, wait periods, etc) to make sure only people who “deserve” help can access it.

Impact on People Who Are Homeless & the Broader Community:

- Worse physical & mental health outcomes
- Increased barriers to securing housing & employment
- Results in services focused on children or others seen as innocent, while limiting services available to single adults
- Reinforces the cycle of chronic homelessness
- More expensive than providing housing and the services that people need



HOMELESSNESS IS A SYSTEMIC FAILURE

The systemic narrative says people become homeless for economic & structural reasons like lack of affordable housing & high cost of living, low-wage jobs, and lack of access to health care & treatment services. It underscores that we all have a role in solving homelessness.



Solutions:

Ensure adequate affordable housing to meet needs of low income people and prevent homelessness. Provide housing tied to services for those experiencing homelessness.

Impact on People Who Are Homeless & the Broader Community:

- Improved physical & mental health outcomes
- Reduced emergency resource use
- Reduced chronic homelessness
- Less expensive than incarceration & civil action