

# Paul Boden

## And the history of homelessness as we know it today

BY ISRAEL BAYER  
STAFF WRITER

Paul Boden is the executive director of the Western Regional Advocacy Project, or WRAP. The organization is made up of community organizations around the United States, including Street Roots and Right 2 Survive in Portland.

WRAP has focuses on research and education along with community organizing to support people experiencing homelessness.

The group published the groundbreaking report, "Without Housing," in 2012, and has facilitated presenting artwork about housing from the Depression era in museums and to the general public throughout the U.S.

The group also is working with organizations to lead "A Homeless Bill of Rights," campaign in both Oregon and California. The measure would recognize

people experiencing homelessness with rights not recognized today.

We recently sat down with Paul Boden to talk about modern day homelessness and the history of the criminalization of people on the streets.

**Israel Bayer:** Let's start at square one. How did we get to a place of modern day homelessness?

**Paul Boden:** It's pretty simple, when you look at it as cause and effect. We started out in 1979 with deep cuts to our affordable housing programs. It was the last year of (President Jimmy) Carter; it was the recession, it was the hostage crisis in Iran; and Carter did across-the-board cuts to all of the federal programs.

(President Ronald) Reagan came in 1980 with a strong base of support across the neo-liberal economic folks out of the Chicago School of Economics. His revolution was to bring that practice of governance and of priority-setting to the United States government. We did it in the



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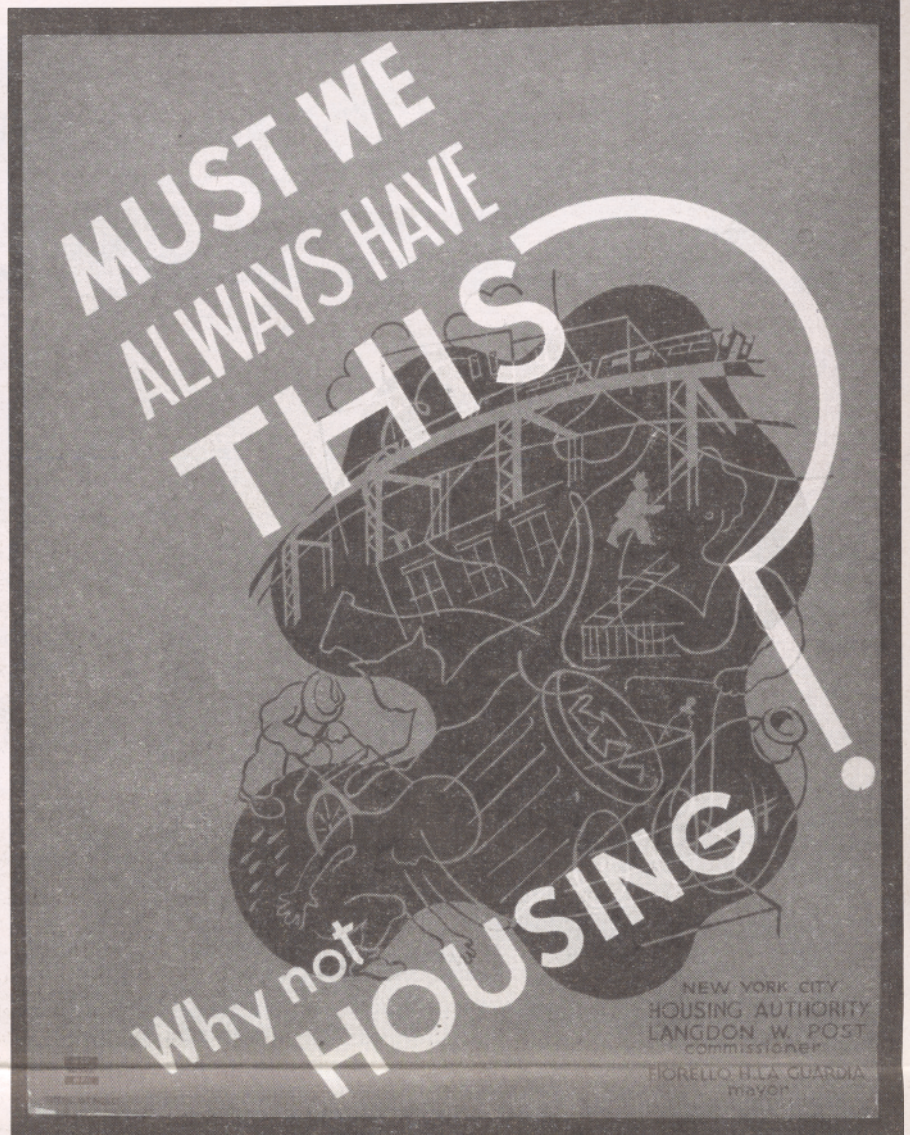


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Above, a 1936 poster from the New York Housing Authority.

"Banana Republic" countries of South America and Central America. We knew how to implement it, and it became the standard. It still is the standard of how priorities get set at the federal level.

Between 1979 and 1983 we saw \$54 billion a year in cuts to affordable housing. By the winter of 1982, we were opening up emergency shelter programs across the country at a rate we had not seen since the Great Depression. Here we are now, 30 years later.

When you look at it from a global perspective, what you notice is, the funding was never restored. You can't continue to decimate financial support systems when housing is a commodity and not think that people without the financial means aren't going to suffer from it. You just can't do it. And clearly, we are doing it.

The consequence of these policies is massive numbers of people from all different geographic and educational

backgrounds — with all different skin colors, single adults, gay kids, straight kids, families — end up homeless. Across the spectrum, we see people ending up without housing. We keep reinventing the wheels of public planning processes and federal priorities, thinking if we can just hit this one magic pill, then we'll fix it without looking at what we've created. I think it's a classic example of cause and effect and connecting the dots, and going back to. When did the housing crisis start, what happened right before it started, and let's see if that wasn't the primary cause of it?

Granted, people will say, 'Housing isn't the only reason people are homeless'. Well, frankly, mental illness existed before 1983. Sexual abuse existed before, and sure as hell poverty and racism existed. So, when you talk about homelessness, not all of the other social justice issues, but the issue of

See **BODEN**, page 9

## Homelessness: 1960-2014

The 2013 Multnomah County point-in-time count identified 2,869 people who were "literally homeless" sleeping in an emergency shelter or unsheltered — on the night of January 30, 2013.

This number includes 1,895 people who were unsheltered (sleeping outside, in a vehicle, or abandoned building) and 974 people who were sleeping in an emergency shelter. An additional 1,572 people were sleeping in transitional housing on the night of the count.

Over the course of a year more than 16,000 people will experience homelessness in Multnomah County alone.

What follows is an abridged history of modern day homelessness:

**1960s: Department of Urban Development and Housing (HUD) is created to develop urban housing as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society.**

- HUD creates Section 23 Leased Housing Program as part of the Housing Act of 1965, allowing local housing authorities to lease privately owned units and sublease them at reduced rents to eligible applicants.
- The Housing and Urban Development Act

ushers in a new era of affordable housing production. Sections 235 and 236 of the act encourage the private sector to produce affordable rental and owner-occupied units through interest rate subsidies. The Fair Housing Act of 1968 is created, banning discrimination in public housing.

**1970s: Mental health consumers begin to be deinstitutionalized — many people with mental illnesses end up homeless or in jail.**

- President Nixon places a moratorium on all subsidized affordable housing production. Congress ends moratorium 18 months later.
- HUD Budget Authority: \$57.7 billion; tax expenditures for home ownership: \$33.2

billion (in 2004 constant dollars). Homelessness is not a systemic problem. HUD subsidizes the construction of 203,046 new housing units.

- USDA Section 515 program creates 38,650 rural affordable housing units.
- Urban Renewal largely becomes domain of local governments and is associated with "commercial revitalization," gentrification and demolition of cheap housing stock.
- 1980s: President Ronald Reagan takes office and dismantles New Deal and Great Society social programs designed to assist the poor, most significantly the federal funding of affordable housing production.**
- HUD Low/Moderate-Income Housing