

No Field of Dreams

'IF YOU BUILD IT, THEY WILL COME'
IS NOT TRUE OF HOMELESS SERVICES

One of the most common questions I get asked when speaking about the work of SquareOne Villages is some version of Field of Dreams: "If you build it, they will come." Unlike the movie, however, it is not seen as desirable. "Won't we just attract more homeless people if we make it easier for them to live here?" I have been asked something along that line in more than 10 states and 30 or 40 different communities. There are so many problems with the question that it is hard to know where to start.

It assumes, for instance, that unhoused people have both the ability and the desire to move. The reality is that most people, whether housed or unhoused, have a hometown where they prefer to live. And second, moving requires a certain amount of resources which unhoused people do not have. Yes, there are those individuals who are not tethered to any place and may freely move about on a whim, but those are not the majority of the unhoused, not by a long shot.

A second problem with the question is, every community cannot simultaneously attract people from the other, at least not that would make any statistical difference. The attraction theory only works in one direction, from somewhere to somewhere.

From where do people think these vast numbers of unhoused people are coming? Not California; it has the highest number of unhoused people in the country. (More on that in a moment.) If you know anything about Portland and Seattle, the unhoused certainly are not leaving those cities in large numbers. Maybe from states like Alabama and Mississippi where poverty rates are higher? Turns out their housing costs are also much lower and hence even people with low income are still able to afford housing. The only place that seems likely for people to leave when they lose their housing is rural communities where there are few support services. In fact, however, even rural communities in Oregon are now discovering that they too have growing numbers of unhoused people who call their town home.

A third problem with the question is just the built-in bias against people without housing. Substitute "people of color," "Jews" or "LGBTQ" for "homeless" in that question and you see the problem. Why is bias against people without housing any more acceptable than bias based on race, religion or sexual orientation? This kind of us/them thinking, which sees the unhoused as "the other" rather than as part of the community, further stigmatizes the unhoused, adding an additional burden to their already overburdened lives.

While I typically respond to the question with some version of the above, I have not been able to cite any good studies to refute the assumption behind it, that unhoused people move to where life will be easier without housing. That brings us back to California, a state, it is often assumed, that attracts the unhoused. People just point to the statistics — 30 percent of the unhoused in the U.S. are in California, more than double it should have with just 12 percent of the total population. Obviously they must be doing something to make it easier for unhoused people to live there!

A new study from the Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative of the University of California, San Francisco, reveals that not to be the case at all.

In a survey of 3,200 unhoused people in California, selected to provide a representative sample of the unhoused population, researchers found that 90 percent of the unhoused in California were from California when they lost their housing. Further, 75 percent remained in the county where they lost their housing. To put it differently, there are about 171,000 unhoused people in California. Of that, 10 percent came from out of state. That means of the 550,000 unhoused people in the U.S., only 17,000 chose to move to California.

And how many left California? Hard to know, but it's easy to imagine that just as many left California to be closer to relatives, or where they might find a job or cheaper housing. The point which this study should make clear is that the vast majority of the unhoused remain in the state and likely in the community where they lost their housing. The idea that "if you build it, they will come," may be true for baseball and movies, but when it comes to shelter, or better, affordable housing for the unhoused, it is no field of dreams — just the right thing to do. ■

Dan Bryant is the executive director of SquareOne Villages, a local nonprofit dedicated to creating democratic communities with homes that are permanently affordable and environmentally sustainable.

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