

HOMELESSNESS: THE FAULT IN "AMERICAN GREATNESS"



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The Oakland Institute

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Introducing his 2018 budget – “A New Foundation for American Greatness” – Donald Trump proclaimed that it aims to “unleash the dreams of the American people” while bringing an end to the era of “small thinking.”¹

But whose dreams does Mr. Trump think his budget will unleash?

If approved by Congress, this budget would make massive cuts to Medicaid and welfare programs. It would drive millions of people off food stamps, with a 25 percent cut to a program that provides a vital lifeline to accessing food for some 42 million Americans,² many of whom are working poor.³ Trump’s budget would also eliminate the Home Investment Partnerships Program, which supports affordable housing (\$948 million); the Choice Neighborhoods revitalization program (\$125 million); and the Community Development Block Grant program (nearly \$3 billion).⁴ And it would reduce rental assistance programs by over \$1.9 billion – programs that, according to the budget’s own estimates, subsidize rent for 4.5 million very low-income households.⁵

The budget goes on to target people with disabilities by proposing major changes to federal disability programs with cuts of \$72 billion over 10 years, and reducing the budget of the Office of Disability Employment Policy, which works to remove barriers to employment for those with disability, by \$11 million.⁶

Meanwhile, additional funding would be directed towards building a border wall with Mexico, increasing the Defense Department’s budget by billions of dollars, and hiring more Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers.⁷

The proposed budget suggests that Trump has declared war on the poor in the US. It comes at a time when over half a million Americans are homeless⁸ and puts a stop to the decline of homelessness recorded under the Obama administration – a drop of 27 percent, or almost 28,600 people, between 2010 and 2016.⁹ California, the Golden State, accounts for nearly half of all unsheltered people in the country and between 2015 and 2016 saw a two percent increase in homelessness.¹⁰

This photo essay, by photojournalist Rucha Chitnis, gives faces and voices to the people behind these numbers. Documenting economic inequality and homelessness in California’s Bay Area, it shines light on homelessness, the impact of poverty on people with disabilities, and the criminalization of the poor – three significant issues in the US that Trump’s proposed budget will have a devastating impact on. The essay makes it clear that low-income and disabled community members will not see their dreams unleashed by Mr. Trump’s new financial plan. The budget will “Make America Great Again” for the already rich, while devastating the rest.

Importantly, the photo essay also shares the stories and elevates the work of several groups in the Bay Area, including the St. Mary’s Center, ‘First They Came for the Homeless’ encampment protestors, the Western Regional Advocacy Project, and others. The members, volunteers, staff, and supporters of these organizations and initiatives work tirelessly to provide basic assistance, advocate for social safety nets, and reverse the trend of criminalizing the poor. This essay is a tribute to their work and a call for action to join their efforts and mobilize to oppose Trump’s war on the poor.

Homelessness: The Fault in “American Greatness”

Brett Schnaper arrived in Berkeley when he was 17 years old. He became homeless at the age of 54. “I have osteoarthritis, and my nerves are dying. I couldn’t pay my rent and became homeless,” he said. “If I don’t find adequate housing, I will probably wind up in a wheelchair. If I spend another winter out on the streets, I will probably die.”

Schnaper is part of “First They Came for the Homeless” encampment protest. Most members of this encampment community have a disability. Their agenda is clear: to become the visible faces of homelessness by setting up tents in the heart of the city to bring attention to the crisis of affordable housing. “Homeless people can solve their own problems, because this is our lived experience. The city is hiring professionals with book knowledge, who have not lived a life on the streets. I have ten years on the streets—a PhD in poverty,” said Michael Zint, the founder of the encampment protest.

Zint says their camp has been raided over 15 times since October 2016, often before dawn when it is bitterly cold. Each time, their possessions are confiscated by the police, including tents and blankets. The encampment protestors are demanding the city of Berkeley sanction an area for a responsibly-run tent city, where the rules would be designed by the homeless to live safely without the threat of eviction. “This is the very first step for our stability. Tents save lives. Then we are requesting the city to set up tiny homes or container homes, which are not expensive, and finally move the homeless into affordable housing, which will take years,” he said.

Across Oakland and Berkeley, tent camps are sprouting near BART tracks and underpasses. As rents skyrocket in San Francisco and Oakland, working class communities are disproportionately affected. “This is re-segregation in the guise of gentrification,” said Janny Castillo, Seniors for Hope and Justice Coordinator at St. Mary’s Center,¹¹ a nonprofit that serves at-risk seniors and preschoolers in Oakland. “We have lost a large percentage of people of color, who can’t afford to live in a city where they have had deep roots for generations.”

In the face of a narrative of Make America Great Again and a new presidency, advocacy groups for the homeless believe that they continue to fight a system that has a long history

and legacy of criminalizing the poor and the homeless. “We have been fighting these battles for over 50 years. Whether it is Trump or Governor Brown, we are against a wall that doesn’t care for the poor. We are still fighting for civil rights and anti-poverty programs,” said Castillo.

“What’s important to us now is that America does not forget again,” said Joe Wilson at the Citywide Homeless People’s Assembly outside San Francisco’s City Hall to commemorate Martin Luther King Jr. Day. “People put their lives and livelihoods on the line for our rights. So many lives are still not considered worthy. In this struggle, every voice matters. We have to stay woke and be strong,” said Wilson, who is a program manager at Hospitality House, a community center in the Tenderloin. Joe was homeless over 30 years ago, and found shelter at Hospitality House. He spent the next several years as a social justice advocate and returned to Hospitality House as a program manager. Last year, he shared his moving story in the *San Francisco Chronicle* titled, Homelessness Doesn’t Have to Be the End of the Journey.¹²

Castillo concurs. “Homelessness is a condition. It doesn’t define who you are,” she said. Castillo has emerged as a powerful community organizer and an advocate for homeless seniors and attributes her lived experience as a driver for her activism. “I was a single mother of three and was homeless for nine years. Boona Cheema of Building Opportunities for Self Sufficiency¹³ took me in, and I was able to get back on my feet,” she said.

Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP)¹⁴, a coalition of social justice groups on the West Coast that works to expose and eliminate the root causes of homelessness and poverty, is spearheading a California Statewide Homeless Bill of Rights Campaign to decriminalize homelessness. Paul Boden, Executive Director of WRAP, contends that the US has a long history of criminalizing the poor, minority, and immigrant communities—from the Jim Crow segregation laws to Operation Wetback in California and Arizona in the 1950s to remove undocumented Mexican immigrants to Sundown Towns that did not allow minorities to remain in the town after sunset.

In 2010, WRAP surveyed 721 homeless people in California on their interactions with the police, private guards, and the



criminal legal system. Their data¹⁵ indicated that 79 percent of the illegal offenses targeting homeless people were for sleeping in a public space, with 56 percent of these people cited and 31 percent arrested. “Poor people are being criminalized simply for sleeping, sitting, or standing still. Because of this, we wrote the Right to Rest Act,” he said.

Boden, who was homeless as a youth, credits Reaganomics for worsening homelessness, when dramatic cuts were made to federal spending for subsidized housing. Reagan also discarded Jimmy Carter’s Mental Health Systems Act, which cut federal spending on services for the mentally ill, and thousands of beds in state-run mental hospitals were shut down. “Poor people didn’t create homelessness. The federal government did. And now homeless people are being sent to jail for simply existing,” said Boden.

According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty’s survey of 187 cities in 2014,¹⁶ 53 percent of cities prohibit sitting or lying down in particular public places. “Homelessness is caused by a severe shortage of affordable housing. Over 12.8 percent of the nation’s supply of low-income housing has been permanently lost since

2001, resulting in large part, from a decrease in funding for federally subsidized housing since the 1970s. The shortage of affordable housing is particularly difficult for extremely low-income renters who, in the wake of the foreclosure crisis, are competing for fewer and fewer affordable units,” the report observed.

“We need to step up our responsibility. People need to realize that people on the sidewalk or tents are human beings with real values, who need to be recognized, not just tolerated,” said J.C. Orten, founder of Night on the Streets Catholic Worker.

Seniors at St. Mary’s Center in West Oakland agree. Twenty of them gathered in December last year to share their vision for unconditional prosperity in Oakland as part of Alameda County’s listening session for “All In: The New War on Poverty.” On top of their list: affordable housing and dignity. “We need safe and secure housing,” said Benny Whitfield, a 73-year-old senior, who was once homeless and lived by the railroad tracks in Oakland. “Seniors need a community and space to gather to support each other emotionally and spiritually,” he said.



Advocates for the homeless held a vigil on the steps of Berkeley’s City Council for Laura Jadwin, a horticulturist who died homeless on Martin Luther King, Jr. Way, near Berkeley High School. “There’s a terror of dying poor, and a terror of dying alone. We are here to say her life mattered,” said one woman at the vigil.



“Many people have their first experience with homelessness in their 50s in Oakland,” said Janny Castillo. “Each of their stories and journeys are unique.”



“Everyone deserves a home,” said a four-year-old girl at the Citywide Homeless People’s Assembly outside San Francisco’s City Hall to commemorate Martin Luther King Jr. Day. According to a 2014 report by the National Center on Family Homelessness, California¹⁷ is the third worst state for child homelessness, with over half a million children affected.





Most members of the First They Came for the Homeless encampment protest in Berkeley are disabled. “The moment people see me with my sleeping bag on the streets, I become a non-person in their eyes,” said Brett Schnaper, a member of the encampment. “It’s such a delight to be seen.”



J.C. Orten makes his morning run serving the homeless in downtown Berkeley. He picks up their mail, gives medicines, and manages their money as their representative payee. “The greatest gift you can give is a gift of self,” he said.



Benny Whitfield, a 73-year-old senior, has been in recovery for eight years with support and services at St. Mary's Center. "The Center is my family and community. I am here three times a week for my recovery meetings," he said.



Seniors and youth gather for a Sacred Storytelling Circle to share their intergenerational experiences and wisdom at St. Mary's Center. As seniors share their stories, one youth remarked: "We mostly learn colonial history from a white man's perspective in schools. I wish we learned more about Native communities and histories of other people of color."





“We have a long road ahead of us,” said Paul Boden at the Citywide Homeless People’s Assembly. “We have to stop the commodification of public housing and spaces for the interests of private developers and business entities.”



According to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, nearly 10 percent of the adult homeless population is veterans. “Politicians need to be accountable to the poor. They need to educate themselves by spending time on the streets—see how people survive and are treated. Spend a year on the concrete,” said Arthur, a homeless veteran in downtown Berkeley.



“People didn’t create homelessness, but are blamed for it,” said Bilal Ali, organizer at the Coalition for the Homelessness, at the homeless people’s assembly. “We are not afraid of Donald Trump. We have to organize or die. People bring change.”



Seniors gather at St. Mary’s Center to share their vision of Oakland’s development.

“We need to create social justice programs with wellness intentions. We should think about how we can create a pool of resources with the seniors so they can engage and think about their own strengths,” said Castillo.





Muslim and Eritrean immigrant communities in the East Bay head to Fruitvale to deliver hot meals and blankets for the homeless during the holidays.



“We are homeless but not helpless,” said Mike Lee, member of the First They Came for the Homeless Encampment. “We are the public face of a protest to demand change, so that people can talk to us and find out who we are.”

Endnotes

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- 9 *Ibid*, p. 4.
- 10 *Ibid*, p 13.
- 11 To find out more about St. Mary's Center and their programs, please visit: <http://stmaryscenter.org>
- 12 To find out more about Hospitality House and their programs, please visit: <http://hospitalityhouse.org/homelessness-doesnt-end-journey/>
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