

San Francisco's Homeless Encampments Expose the Failure of a Liberal Utopia

In America's most liberal city, increasingly visible homeless camps are a stark symbol of San Francisco's economic hollowing out and the failure of progressive governance.

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SAN FRANCISCO – “You want the down-low? I’ll give you the down-low. These guys will all tell you something different, but the one thing everyone here has in common is that they all do drugs.”

I’m talking to a group of homeless men camped out under Highway 101 in San Francisco’s Mission neighborhood, where a half-dozen tents are set up on a wide sidewalk across the street from a Best Buy. The thirtysomething guy who’s telling me it’s all about drugs doesn’t want to give me his name.

That’s partly because he doesn’t consider himself homeless—he stays with boyfriends, he says, and couch-surfs—and partly because he’s smoking weed with his friend, Robert Shuman, a 45-year-old self-described “homeless tweaker” who freely admits he’s homeless because he got hooked on drugs and lost everything. They’re reclining next to a large tent amid a heap of bicycles, scavenged office furniture, and a shopping cart full of food. Every few minutes, someone emerges from one of the tents and grabs something to eat. The smells of weed and urine punctuate the air.

This is one of hundreds of homeless encampments that have cropped across San Francisco in the last few years, many in residential neighborhoods and other highly visible areas (Shuman and his friends had pitched their tents less than 50 yards from a food-truck court bustling with a lunchtime crowd.)

Homelessness has always been a feature of life in the Golden Gate City, but the encampments—and the concentrations of used needles, feces, and urine that come with them—are new. Dozens of tent camps now line freeway underpasses and sidewalks throughout the city, despite a 2016 ordinance authorizing city officials to clear them out. The best the city can do, according to Mohammad Nuru, director of the city’s Department of Public Works, is stay in “firefighter mode.” “When you have needles or you have poop or you have places with the stench of urine, those are the priorities,” he said in a recent interview. “In Public Works land, that’s like a 911 call.”

The tent camps have increased visibility of the city’s homeless even as the homeless population has remained relatively stable. A recent survey found there were about 7,500 homeless people in the city, about the same as the last count, in 2015. That’s the year the tents first showed up in large numbers, during citywide cleanup efforts ahead of the Super Bowl. Housing activists feared the cleanup would result in forced removal of San Francisco’s homeless population—and for good reason. “They are going to have to leave,” said the late Mayor Ed Lee at the time. “We’ll give you an alternative, we are always going to be supportive, but you are going to have to leave the streets.”

But they didn’t. Activists and homeless advocates protested, and distributed hundreds of tents to the city’s homeless in open defiance of the Super Bowl cleanup push. Since then, tent encampments have become a permanent feature of the city, despite aggressive efforts to clear

them out. Municipal workers will clear an encampment and confiscate tents and property, only to have them pop up elsewhere. Part of the problem is that the tech boom is fueling the development of areas once populated by the homeless. Increasingly, there's nowhere for them to hide, so they just camp out on the sidewalks and near the freeways.

I heard the problem had gotten so bad that the Target store downtown keeps its tents in a locked glass case. A quick visit confirmed the rumor: not only were the tents under lock and key, so were the camping gear and backpacks. While I was there, a homeless man in a trench coat loitered in front of the tent case, muttering to himself and pawing at the glass.

Leftist Governance Hollows Out The Middle Class

It's easy for conservatives to make fun of San Francisco. From its Summer of Love hippie nostalgia to its tech utopianism and uber-progressive politics, San Francisco is both liberal icon and parody—an easy target for anyone skeptical of free love, fur bans, and sanctuary cities.

The easy riposte is that, for one thing, San Francisco is geographically stunning, with its hills and parks, ornate Victorian row houses, and gorgeous waterfronts and bridges. For another, it's spectacularly wealthy. Per capita personal income in the city is north of \$110,000, and according to a 2016 survey, you aren't considered wealthy in San Francisco until your net worth tops \$6 million.

In other words, San Francisco is rich and beautiful—and it doesn't care what Republicans think. Like many large U.S. cities, Democrats here preside over a political monoculture. Less than 10 percent of San Franciscans voted for Donald Trump in 2016, and the city hasn't had a GOP mayor since 1964. The Board of Supervisors (the city council) is technically nonpartisan, but every seat on the board is occupied by a registered Democrat. The top four candidates in the current mayoral race—an African-American woman, an Asian-American woman, a Hispanic woman, and an openly gay man—will all be “firsts,” no matter who wins the special election in June. Also certain: the winner will be a Democrat.

The absence of any organized political opposition, combined with its vast wealth, makes San Francisco a kind of proof-of-concept for progressive governance. If there's anywhere progressives should be able to enact their schemes for a perfectly-ordered society, it's here. A booming tech industry has made vast new resources available to the city: the 2017-18 municipal budget exceeds \$10 billion, nearly a third larger than the budget was a decade ago. City government now spends roughly \$11,500 per person each year, more than any other city in the country (including New York) and almost double per capita state spending.

That's why the housing and homelessness problems besetting the city open it up to more than mere mockery from conservatives but substantive criticism of progressive governance writ large. It's not just homeless encampments that bedevil San Francisco, but also the flight of the middle class and the emergence of a kind of citywide caste system: the wealthy, the service class, and the destitute. In some ways, San Francisco is becoming something progressives are supposed to hate: a private club for the super-rich.

But while the homeless encampments have made the poor more visible, the middle class is quietly disappearing. A recent report from the real-estate site Redfin found San Francisco lost more residents than any other city did in the last quarter of 2017, and demand for moving trucks in the Bay Area is so high that U-Haul is charging customers as much as ten times more for trips out of the region than for trips in.

Seen in this light, the homeless encampments are just one aspect of a larger problem afflicting one of the wealthiest and most progressive enclaves in the country. The city's infamous

NIMBY-ism consistently blocks the construction of new housing, which is one reason the median price of a single-family home in San Francisco is now \$1.5 million.

As Daniel Duane noted in a 2016 *New York Times* essay on homelessness in San Francisco, the skyrocketing cost of housing in California is anything but a function of market forces: “For decades, even as employment booms have led to population booms, California voters — myself among them — have fought to freeze the good life in amber by resisting increases in housing density and mass transit,” he writes. “With income gains going mostly to the elite, rents skyrocket, the middle class competes for the cheapest places on the market, and the very poorest end up on the street.”

Competition among the middle class for scarce housing is taking increasingly extreme forms. A growing number of middle-class workers and professionals in San Francisco have been reduced to living in dorms with shared bathrooms and communal kitchens. One dorm developer, Starcity, whose rooms go for \$1,200 to \$2,400 a month fully furnished, told the *New York Times* that its target demographic makes between \$40,000 and \$90,000 a year.

That such ventures are catching on in San Francisco simply reflects the stark reality that for school teachers, mechanics, musicians, and anyone else in a non-tech job, homeownership is simply out of reach. One recent real estate report found the minimum household income required to buy a median-priced home in San Francisco is \$303,000. Municipal officials, prompted by the story of a homeless high school math teacher, even have a plan to provide public housing for the city’s teachers.

Homelessness Is San Fran’s Single Greatest Wedge Issue

But of course the plight of the city’s middle class remains less visibly startlingly than the plight of the homeless. That’s why it attracts far less attention from the region’s massive tech firms and philanthropists, some of which are now pitching in. Tech giant Cisco recently pledged to donate \$50 million over the next five years to address homelessness in the Bay Area, and last year, the city got a \$100 million donation to reduce homelessness from a private nonprofit group.

But the question of what to do with such donations, along with how much public funding to spend on housing and caring for the homeless, has long bedeviled San Francisco. To better understand the politics of homelessness here, I stopped by the offices of the Coalition on Homelessness in the city’s notoriously dystopian Tenderloin neighborhood, where on any given weekday the streets are essentially an open-air drug and prostitution bazaar—all within easy walking distance of City Hall and the corporate headquarters of Twitter and Uber. (When I stopped at the Starbucks across the street from Twitter HQ, a security guard and a homeless man were arguing loudly over whether, if the homeless man agreed not to lie down on the sidewalk but remain standing, he should be allowed to keep hanging around.)

The Coalition on Homelessness has been around for 30 years, and its executive director, Jennifer Friedenbach, has been there for 23 of them. She told me homelessness is *the* wedge issue in San Francisco, pitting downtown Democrats, whom Friedenbach describes as “anti-homeless” and generally supportive of “punitive” vagrancy measures, against neighborhood Democrats, who tend to be “less interested in punishing the homeless than trying to help them.”

It’s a familiar, almost cliché liberal frame: cold-hearted capitalists versus well-meaning progressives. But it plays well in San Francisco. Lately, the top candidates in the mayor’s race have even been competing to see who can sound more concerned about homelessness and housing in response to growing interest in those problems from all sides. “Some of that has to do with higher-income people moving into impoverished areas and not tolerating the presence of

poor people and people of color,” Friedenbach says, “and some of it has to do with increased visibility of the homeless, which impacts folks on a day-to-day basis.”

Both of those factors are being driven largely by San Francisco’s economic success. Bay Area progressives find all this troubling because of course progressive tech utopias aren’t supposed to produce filthy, drug-ridden homeless camps. As Erielle Davidson recently chronicled in these pages, day-to-day living in San Francisco now involves navigating incessant petty crime, used needles, and human feces: “The public defecation problem has become so intolerable in San Francisco that private citizens have built an online map to track the concentrations of poop in the city, so that pedestrians may know to avoid certain areas.” A recent visit to downtown San Francisco by a special United Nations envoy on adequate housing made headlines when the envoy compared conditions in the city to what she’d seen in the streets of Mumbai and Mexico City.

San Francisco Belongs to the Homeless

San Franciscans like to tell themselves comforting stories about these problems. They cite, as Friedenbach cited to me, President Reagan’s budget cuts to federally subsidized housing and mental health hospitals, despite decades-old research debunking the claim that those cuts caused a spike in homelessness. Or they say that San Francisco draws in homeless people from other parts of the country, despite considerable evidence that the vast majority of the city’s homeless are homegrown.

Nearly every homeless person I spoke to not only said he’d lived in San Francisco for many years but also that he wasn’t interested in staying at the city’s shelters or in single-occupancy residential hotels. A 63-year-old black man by the name of Steven, who says he was born and raised in San Francisco, told me that yes, there are resources for the homeless, “but not all of that is without strings. You’ve got to do this, do that, go to this meeting, go to that meeting—to stay qualified. And you don’t want that on you.”

Another man, Ronny Goodman, who lives in a mobile tent-and-cart contraption that he moves to a new spot about once every three days, says sometimes he’s forced to move it multiple times a day. He tells me he’s lived in San Francisco his whole life and been homeless since he got out of prison in 2010, but lately he feels like he’s being run out of town.

“When they tell me to move, I ask them, where can I go?” he says. “Where can I go that won’t be a problem in the city, since you don’t want me here?” Goodman, 60, adds that he’s an artist, and refuses to stay in the shelters or city-funded housing because they won’t let him keep his canvases and paints in those places.

Back at the tent encampment under Highway 101, a white man named Oscar McKinney, age 61, tells me he’s lived in San Francisco since 1976 and been homeless since 1985. He says he tried living in a single-room occupancy hotel for 11 months, paid for by the city, but it didn’t work out because they wouldn’t let his boyfriend stay with him. He says he’s no longer interested in any housing programs or shelters on offer from the city, and that he will never reintegrate into society. “This is my permanent housing,” he says, gesturing to his tent. “I think I’m terminally homeless. But I live my life and I’m happy the way I am. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to change.”

In San Francisco, he doesn’t really need to. Sure, the police force him to move his tent about once a month, but McKinney says he’s got plenty of food, he has what he calls “good neighbors” (referring to his fellow homeless campers), and he gets free showers from Lava Mae,

a charity that retrofits old city buses into mobile shower and toilet facilities for people living on the streets.

For occasional respite, McKinny and his friends have recourse to Navigation Centers, a municipal program that offers temporary housing at a handful of shelters. Residents can stay for up to 30 days and bring their pets and belongings with them. The idea was to help the homeless “navigate” into permanent housing, but despite some initial buzz the evidence suggests most of those who check into Navigation Centers return to the streets once they’re discharged.

The difficulty of transitioning into permanent housing makes more sense in light of the myriad problems facing San Francisco’s homeless population. According to the city’s most recent “homeless census,” a survey and point-in-time count of the homeless conducted every other year since 2005, 69 percent said they had been living in San Francisco prior to becoming homeless and 55 percent said they’d been homeless for a decade or more. Forty-one percent admit to having a drug or alcohol problem, and 39 percent say they suffer from mental illness of some kind.

Given those numbers, it’s an open question whether the city’s efforts to make drug use easier and safer are helping or hurting. The ubiquitous odor of burning weed in and around homeless camps leaves no question about where the city stands on open marijuana use. Add to that the nonprofit groups that provide access to free needles and, beginning this summer, a handful of private organizations that will open injection sites where homeless drug addicts can shoot up safely.

All of this came to mind as I walked away from McKinny’s encampment and he called out to me, gesturing to the buildings and streets around us. There was one more thing I needed to know, he said, as if it weren’t already obvious: “This is *our* city!”