

# Speaking Up and Speaking Out: Systemic Cruelty

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When researching homelessness and the housing crisis, the first thing I notice is the cruelty.

For example, from the Heritage Foundation (Rufo, 2020):

“First, policymakers must ensure a baseline of public order—in short, enforce the laws against public camping, drug consumption, and homelessness-related property crimes—which is a prerequisite for any successful intervention.” (emphasis added)

Notice the language: “public order,” “drug consumption,” “property crimes.” Unhoused people are not human; they are public nuisances. Often editorial pieces and news coverage employ language that is insensitive, dehumanizing, and based on fearmongering about people living with addiction and mental health issues.

The concept of “law and order” is a fundamental core of the conservative movement. But “order” is entirely superficial. “Order” means not seeing unhoused people in desperate, vulnerable situations out in public; it means hiding them from public view—not working with them to provide resources, not making structural changes to address cyclical poverty and systemic inequities that are frequent causes of homelessness.

This became especially clear during the COVID-19 pandemic, as companies cut hours and jobs, and rent and mortgages grew increasingly unaffordable. Many were forced onto the streets and into vulnerable situations, perhaps the least of which was putting them at increased risk of COVID. Both COVID and housing instability disproportionately affected communities of color (Lake, 2020). Some temporary relief came in the form of stimulus checks and a freeze on mortgage payments. Then we decided COVID had ended, and the money ran out; America moved on but the unemployed and unhoused remained.

Last year, HUD released its annual report on homelessness and found, “On a single night in 2022, roughly 582,500 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States” (Office of Policy Development and Research). Black and Indigenous people were and are disproportionately represented; the 2022 Annual Homeless Assessment Report found Black people made up 37% of all people experiencing homelessness, and 50% of people experiencing homelessness with children.

Recent legislation attempts to address homelessness. The Housing Crisis Response Act of 2023 would provide over \$150 billion in funding for affordable housing and investments in closing the racial housing gap. The Ending Homelessness Act of 2023 would include \$10 billion to provide housing for people experiencing homelessness and make the temporary Interagency Council on Homelessness permanent. Both acts were introduced to the House by Rep. Maxine Waters, D-C.A., and currently sit in limbo. On the global stage, the 58th session of the UN Commission for Social Development released the first UN resolution on homelessness. But these are words.

The real work is done on the ground, by community organizers and activists making do with what little resources they have. In America, they tend to fall into two categories: prevention and support. The prevention organizations are legislation focused. For example, National Alliance to End Homelessness ([endhomelessness.org/](https://endhomelessness.org/)) and the Urban Institute (<https://www.urban.org/>), each with national headquarters in Washington, D.C. Other support organizations work with people experiencing homelessness to address each person’s unique needs. For example, the Pathways Home ([pathwayshome.org/](https://pathwayshome.org/)) in Birmingham, Ala., and the Spokane Homeless Coalition (<http://www.spokanehc.com/>) in Spokane, Wash.

Here in Indiana, Prosperity Indiana ([prosperityindiana.org](https://prosperityindiana.org)) supports communities across the state.

The Indianapolis Liberation Center (<https://indyliberationcenter.org/about/>) facilitates community collaboration and works to develop policy solutions to systemic issues including housing inequality and labor exploitation. Community collaboration to meet individual needs is vital and necessary support. Policy-focused organizations are a useful complement to community action.

But real change comes from the top. The key first step is recognizing the issue: homelessness is not a “punishment” for an individual’s choices. Homelessness and housing inequality is systemic, purposeful cruelty. No real change will come until lawmakers recognize this and involve unhoused people in developing solutions. As the maxim goes: *Nothing about us without us.*



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