

THE VIEW FROM OUTSIDE

+
A SURVEY OF 300
PEOPLE EXPERIENCING
HOMELESSNESS
IN SAN FRANCISCO

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Director of the Center for Vulnerable Populations, UCSF
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FOREWORD BY DR. MARGOT KUSHEL

Through decades of experience at UCSF and Zuckerberg San Francisco General, Dr. Kushel has seen how homelessness impacts a person's health and well-being. As the Director of the UCSF Center for Vulnerable Populations, Dr. Kushel's work has informed interventions to prevent and end homelessness and to decrease the negative health impacts of homelessness.

For years, San Francisco residents have named homelessness as one of the top challenges facing our City. The extent of the homelessness crisis is apparent to anyone: untold numbers of people living outside, their suffering visible to all. The 2017 Point-in-Time Count found 7,499 residents who were homeless on the day of the count, 58% of whom were unsheltered. But numbers don't tell the full story of what the experience of homelessness means to the people living it.

This report brings the voice of the people who experience homelessness to the fore. Tipping Point Community hired people with lived experience of homelessness and sent them out to shelters, street corners, and encampments to ask questions of, and listen to, people who are homeless.

There are a few key takeaways. **First, people who are homeless in San Francisco are San Franciscans.** Over half had lived in San Francisco for at least 10 years; among Black San Franciscans, over two-thirds had. This data support what we already knew; the vast majority of people who experience homelessness in our City have deep ties to San Francisco. **Second, San Franciscans who are homeless prefer to stay in San Francisco, if possible.** They want to stay for many of the same reasons that housed San Franciscans want to: Their work is here, their families are here, and their children attend school here. Displacement comes at a real (albeit unmeasured) cost. For those displaced, these costs include the loss of social ties—schools, church, health care, family. There is a cost also to San Francisco, which stands to lose the talents, passion, and collective memory of its residents forced out. While leaving San Francisco in search of lower-cost housing may well make sense for some, we need to be honest about the potential costs of doing so. **Third, Black San Franciscans are at dramatically increased risk for homelessness.** Nationwide, Black people are overrepresented among homeless individuals by a factor of three. In San Francisco, by a factor of six. Six percent of the population of San Francisco identifies as Black, but 36% of homeless San Franciscans do. We cannot overlook the role of structural racism—in housing, educational, and criminal justice policies—that have led us to this shameful disparity.

Perhaps what is most striking about the report is how modest the hopes of our homeless neighbors are: a place of their own, where they could come and go as they please, with a bathroom and a place to cook. They want their housed neighbors to acknowledge them, greet them, and treat them with dignity. Hearing the voices of the people who live with homelessness every day brings home both the simplicity and the enormity of the task that lies ahead. Solving homelessness will not be easy. But, as the costs—financial and human—of homelessness mount—we have no choice but to try.



Dr. Margot Kushel

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a San Francisco where everyone has a place to call home. Where people are no longer struggling to survive on the street. A San Francisco that continues to grow without leaving anyone behind.

We are not there yet, but we can get there. We have the ingenuity and the resources to make this vision a reality. That's why Tipping Point Community, a non-profit established in 2005 to break the cycle of poverty in the Bay Area, has committed to cut chronic homelessness in half by 2022 in partnership with the City of San Francisco. It is an ambitious goal and one which cannot be met without close collaboration with the people at the heart of the issue—those experiencing homelessness every day.

We know that when it comes to understanding and solving the problem of homelessness, the most trusted voices are those of the people who have experienced it themselves. So, in the summer of 2018, Tipping Point hired a team of peer field researchers¹ to conduct over 300 surveys of people experiencing homelessness in San Francisco. Previous research (such as the biannual Point-in-Time Count) conducted by the City, explored how people became homeless, but we sought to understand the challenges faced by people experiencing homelessness and what they need to become housed, permanently. To meaningfully reduce homelessness, we need to hear from our unhoused neighbors.

This survey offers us a starting point. It offers quantitative and qualitative information from people experiencing homelessness in San Francisco. Together, the data and the testimonials offer a portrait of the challenges and opportunities we face in reducing homelessness.



“We should provide the opportunity for homeless community members to relate their experiences. The general public would greatly benefit from hearing their stories.”

— PEER FIELD RESEARCHER TJ

¹ Peer field researcher: a person who has lived experience in homelessness

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

We're Just Like You

Many respondents reflected on their desire to be seen for their humanity and treated with respect and dignity by passersby.

+++

“There is no difference between middle class, high class, or low class. We are human.”

+++

“I feel uncomfortable around people who have money; they have an attitude to people who are poor, like on Market Street.”

+++

“Everybody has the ability to change. No one is stuck.”

“Don't be afraid!
Sometimes a simple
'hello' or 'how are
you doing' can make
their day.”



KEY INSIGHTS SUMMARY

San Francisco is home — most survey respondents have been San Franciscans for a very long time. For many, including the 21% who were born and raised in the City, they have strong ties to communities here. “Family,” “job,” and “it’s home” were among the top reasons why people felt it was very important to stay in San Francisco.

It’s been years, not months since 80% of our survey respondents had stable housing. More people responded that they had been homeless for over a decade than had been homeless for less than a year.

A disproportionate impact on Black San Franciscans — while less than 6% of the City’s overall population, Black San Franciscans make up 36% of the homeless population. And Black survey respondents were more likely to be longtime San Franciscans. Nearly two-thirds of Black survey respondents have lived in SF for more than a decade, compared with half of White survey respondents.

Basic needs, basic amenities — more important than location or safety was having a private bathroom and a kitchen to cook meals in. Survey respondents emphasized independent living situations as the most desired path to housing stability.

89% agree that the best way to help someone experiencing homelessness is to support their efforts to find a place to live.



METHODOLOGY

In order to integrate the voices and expertise of people without homes into every aspect of the survey, we hired a team of survey researchers who represented a range of demographics and had direct experience with homelessness, either past or current. The team was hired through referrals from the Coalition on Homelessness, Homeless Youth Alliance, and TGI Justice Project.

The survey consisted of 27 qualitative and quantitative questions. Surveys were conducted on the street and at shelters and drop-in centers in the Tenderloin, Bayview, Mission, Embarcadero, SOMA, Polk, and Haight neighborhoods through the month of May. To find survey participants, we partnered with a range of service organizations including Hamilton Families, Providence Foundation, Next Door Shelter, St. Anthony's, and Mission Neighborhood Resource Center. Participants received a \$25 Visa card upon completion of the survey.

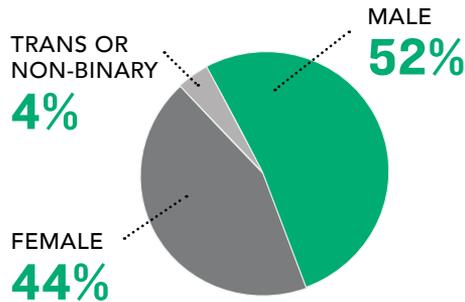
BAYVIEW



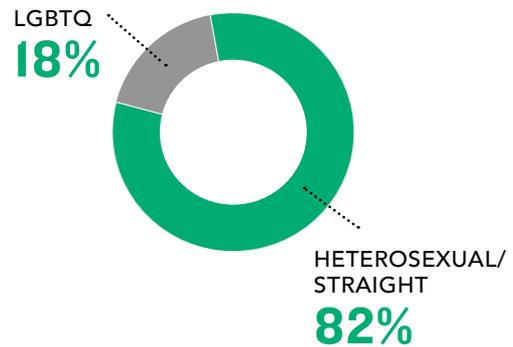
HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY?

While the survey was not a representative sample, it provides important insights into the perspectives of people who are currently living without a home in San Francisco. Here is a demographic snapshot of the people we spoke with.²

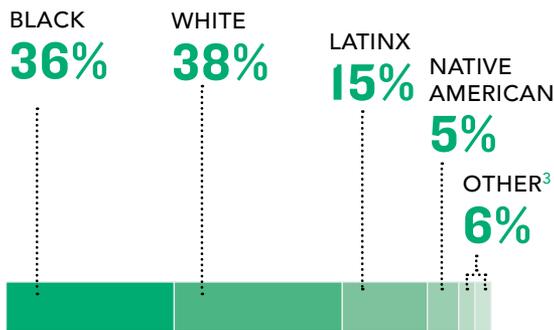
GENDER IDENTITY



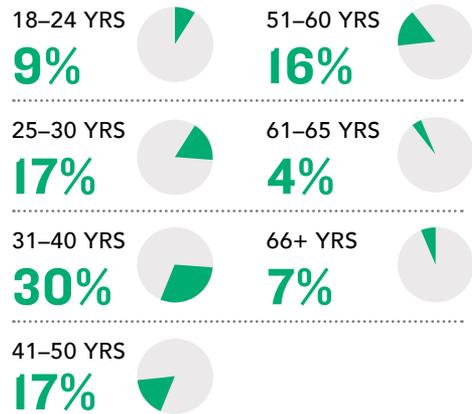
SEXUAL ORIENTATION



RACE



AGE RANGE



“Doing this survey changed me. I started asking the survey questions of myself. It allowed me to see how far I have come, but also that I am just one step, one paycheck away. My expectation working on this survey was that I would earn a little bit of extra money. But I earned a lot of good friends. And I still give them a hug when I see them.”

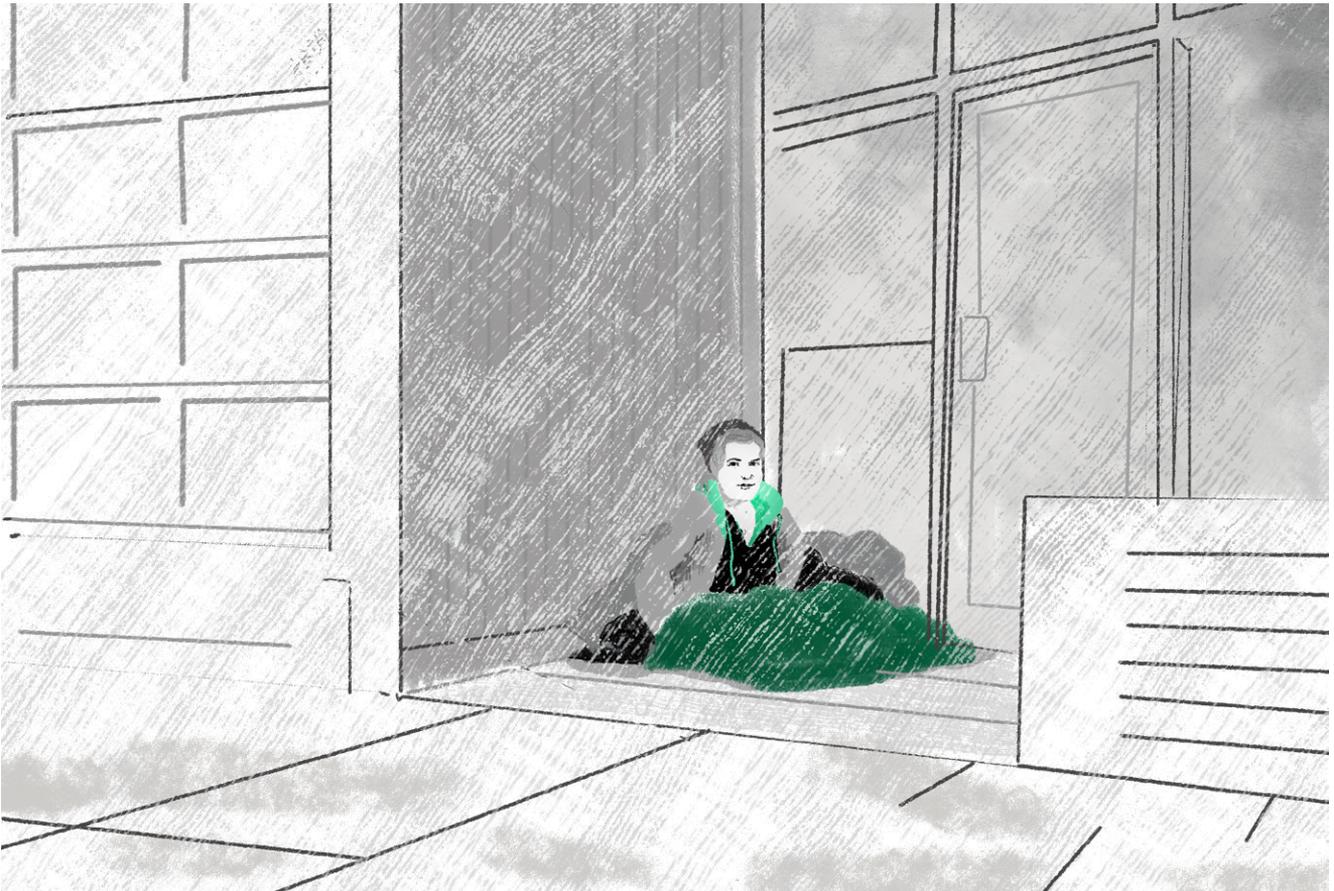
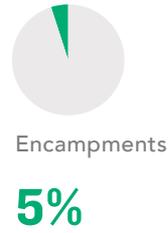
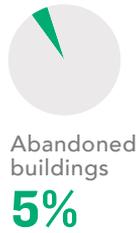
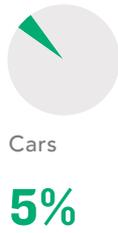
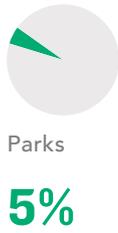
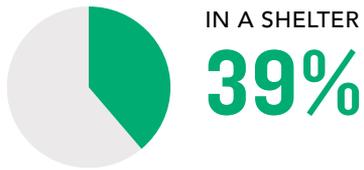
— FIELD RESEARCHER MISS EARL, *on the experience of being hired as a peer researcher*

²Our survey population tracks very closely with the racial makeup of the homeless population, according to the 2017 Point-in-Time Count. Our researchers spoke to a larger percentage of women and a smaller percentage of LGBTQ folks than represented in the Point-in-Time Count.

³3% API and 3% decline to state

WHERE DO YOU PRIMARILY STAY?

While none of our survey respondents had access to stable housing, their living situations varied widely and changed often. Survey respondents described cycling from shelters to streets to encampments or cars, taking shelter wherever they could.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

Freedom from Harassment

While trying to live their everyday lives, people experiencing homelessness are often subjected to harassment and mistreatment by police and bystanders.

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“Don’t judge me because you think all homeless people are the same. Get to know me first.”

+++

“They address it by criminalizing us, making sure we stay out of high-class neighborhoods and making us move everything when there’s an event that brings in tourists. The City just thinks we’re drug addicts and an eyesore.”

“I want people to stop staring. We’re not bad people, and, yes I can take care of my dog.”

+++

“[The way we’re treated is] very disrespectful. Full-on harassing. They take your tents.”

+++

“It seems like they spend more time policing us [than helping us].”

+++

“We’re still human. Just because we’re homeless, it doesn’t make us savages. We’re treated like second-class creatures.”



+ KEY INSIGHT

San Francisco Is Home

Nearly two-thirds of Black respondents have lived in San Francisco for more than 10 years, compared to half of White respondents. Despite this, many survey respondents are hanging on to their San Francisco roots:



LIVED IN SF MORE THAN 10 YEARS

50%



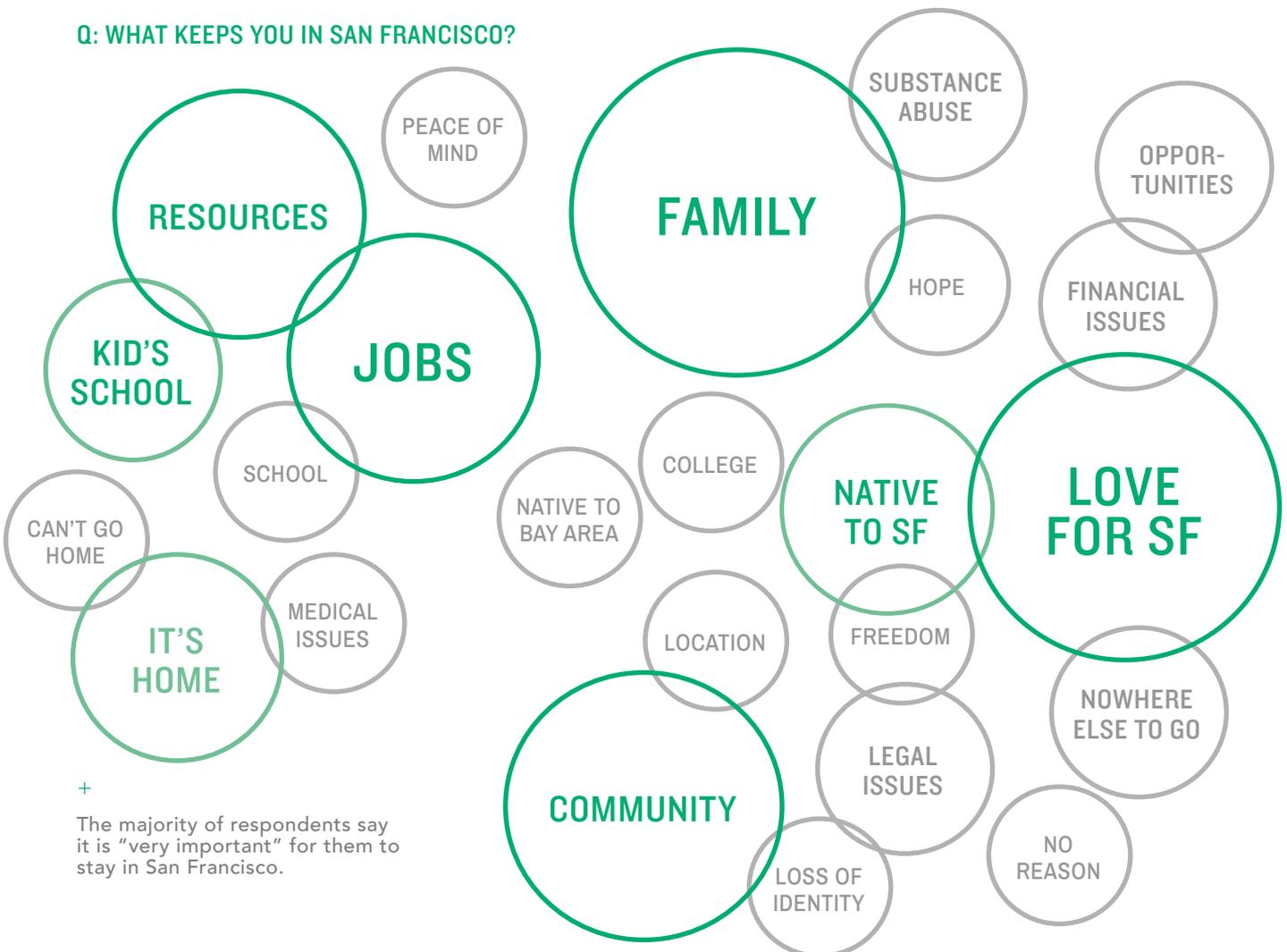
LIVED IN SF ENTIRE LIFE

21%

Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE SUGGESTION THAT RATHER THAN FIND HOUSING FOR PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS IN SAN FRANCISCO THAT WE HOUSE THEM OUTSIDE THE CITY?

“[I] would prefer to stay because San Francisco is my home.”

Q: WHAT KEEPS YOU IN SAN FRANCISCO?



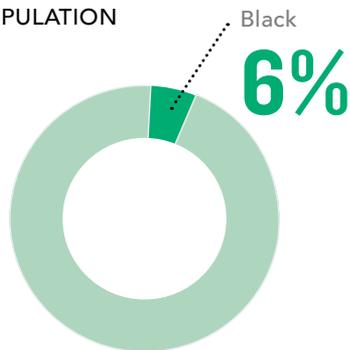
+ The majority of respondents say it is "very important" for them to stay in San Francisco.

+ KEY INSIGHT

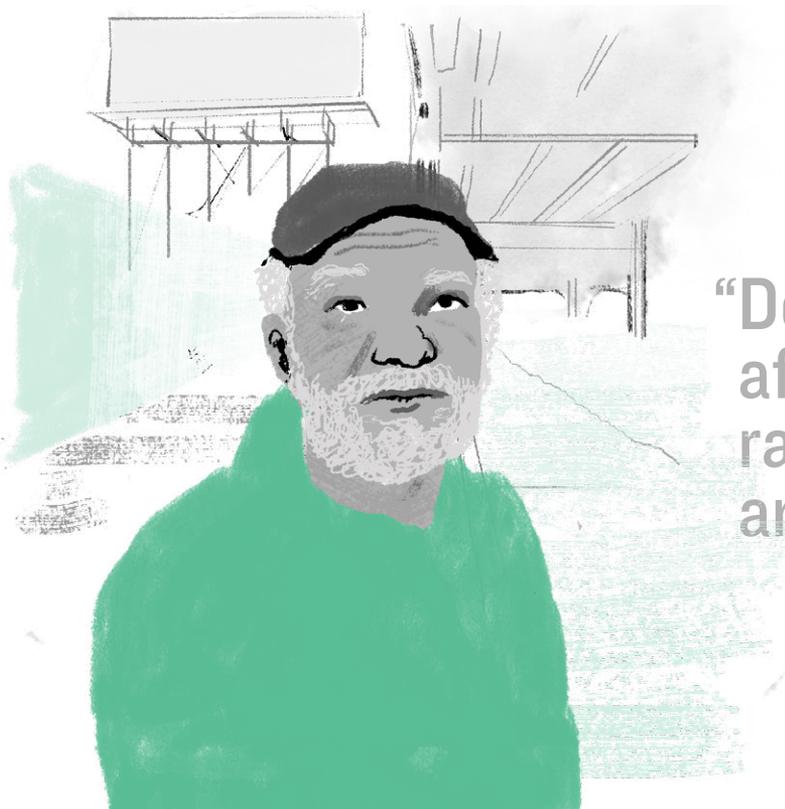
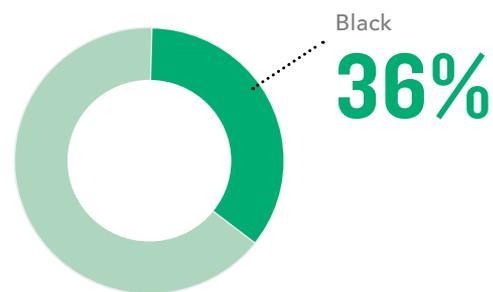
A Disproportionate Impact on Black San Franciscans

While Black people in San Francisco make up less than 6% of the City's population, they are 36% of those without homes. To make a meaningful dent in homelessness, we must acknowledge how housing insecurity interacts with racism. This disproportionality was created by decades of discrimination from being kept out through redlining, kicked out to make way for commercial development, and priced out of the neighborhoods they helped build.

SAN FRANCISCO POPULATION



SAN FRANCISCO HOMELESS POPULATION

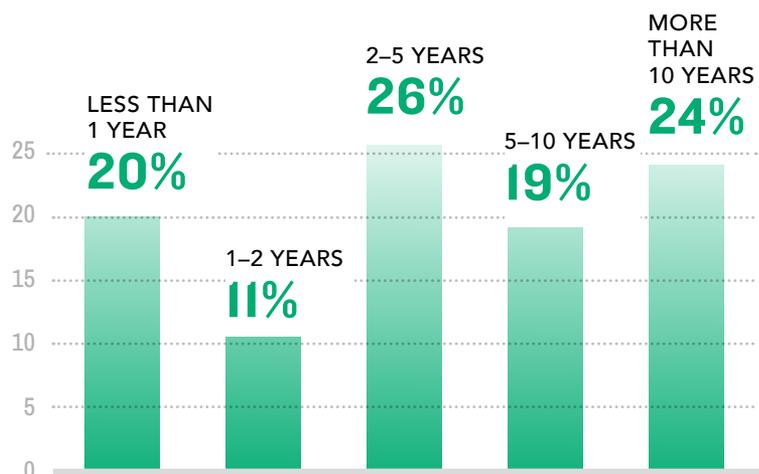


“Don’t throw us out after being born and raised here. Give us an option.”

+ KEY INSIGHT

Years without Housing

Eighty percent of our survey respondents have been without homes for a year or more.



Q: WHAT ARE YOUR HOUSING GOALS?



“To get a place and keep it so I can come back and help others.”



“My own apartment with rent I can pay.”



“To have a place for myself and room for my granddaughter to visit.”

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

It's Easy to Fall Into and Very Hard to Make It Day-to-Day

We asked survey respondents to tell us one thing they would want people to know about homelessness. First, they wanted their neighbors to know just how hard homelessness is, and second, how easy it is to fall into.

Q: WHAT IS THE ONE THING YOU WOULD WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT HOMELESSNESS?

“I struggle every day to make sure my kids are safe and warm inside.”

+++

“It's the hardest thing in the world.”

+++

“My 18-month-old has never had a home.”

+++

“It can happen to anyone. Be mindful of judgment. Under certain circumstances it could be you.”

+++

“It freakin' sucks and with a child it's even harder.”

+++

“Anyone can experience it at any moment. I didn't think I would and I did.”

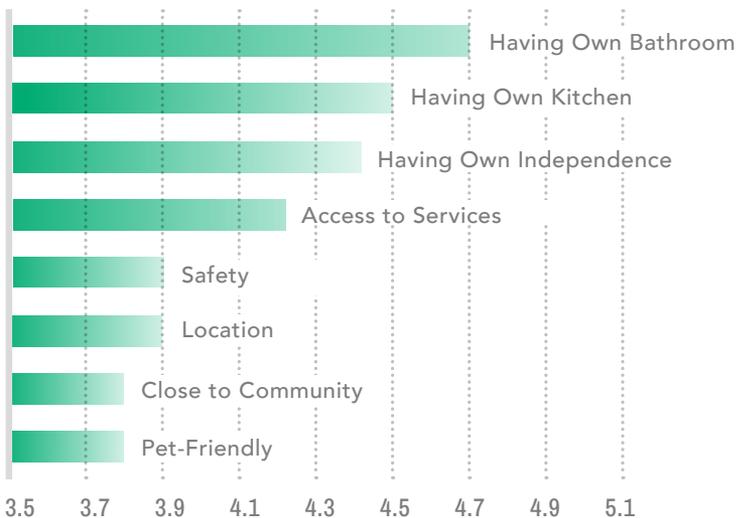


+ KEY INSIGHT

Wanted: A Bathroom, a Kitchen, and Autonomy

Our survey respondents want a home where they can live fully—prioritizing the ability to use the bathroom privately and cook themselves a meal over considerations like safety and location. On a scale of one to five, here are the items they rate as most important.

Q: IF YOU WERE LOOKING FOR HOUSING, HOW IMPORTANT WOULD THE FOLLOWING BE?



Average of respondents' answers, rated by importance on a scale of 1 to 5.



Q: WHAT DO YOU MOST DESIRE IN HOUSING?



"[I want] to have access to a shower, be warm when it's cold, have space to share with a guest."



"Your own space is important. I don't like shared spaces because of prison."



"We have seven kids. We need a single-family home."

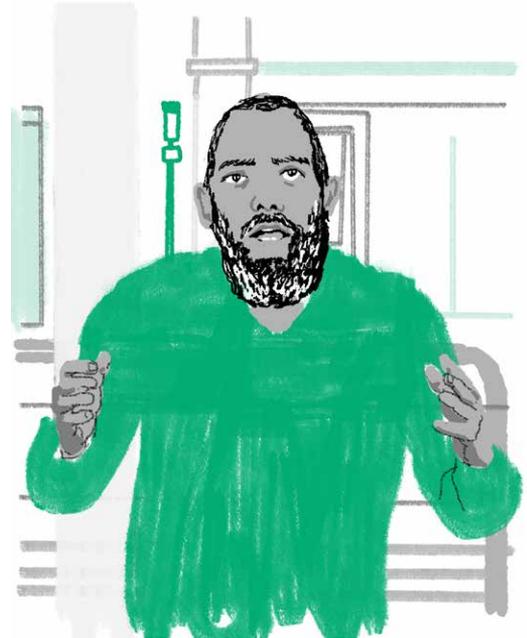
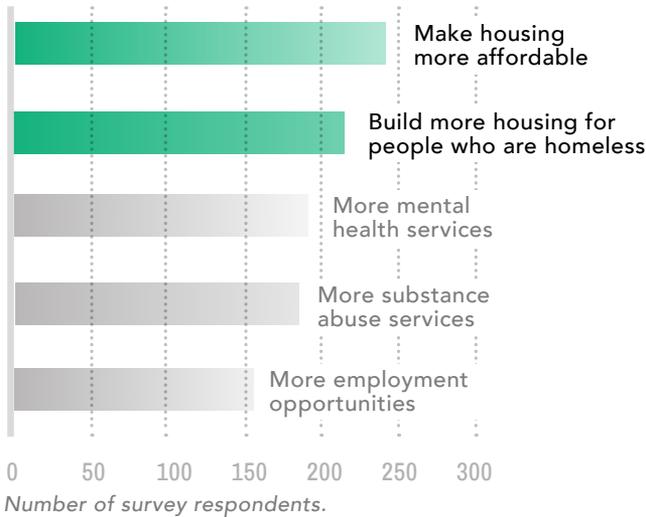
"... My wife is eight months pregnant; in [case of] premature labor, she needs her own bathroom."

+ KEY INSIGHT

The Best Solution Is a Home

When asked what the City could do better when addressing homelessness, survey respondents focused above all else on the need for more housing that is affordable.

Q: WHAT DO YOU THINK THE CITY COULD DO BETTER TO ADDRESS HOMELESSNESS?



Q: WHAT IS ONE THING YOU WANT PEOPLE TO KNOW ABOUT HOMELESSNESS?

“[When you have a house] every time you go home it’s a safe point. So, like in a video game, when you go home it’s like you get to hit pause.”

89%

agree that the best way to help someone experiencing homelessness is to find them a place to live.

88%

agree that San Francisco can reduce homelessness.



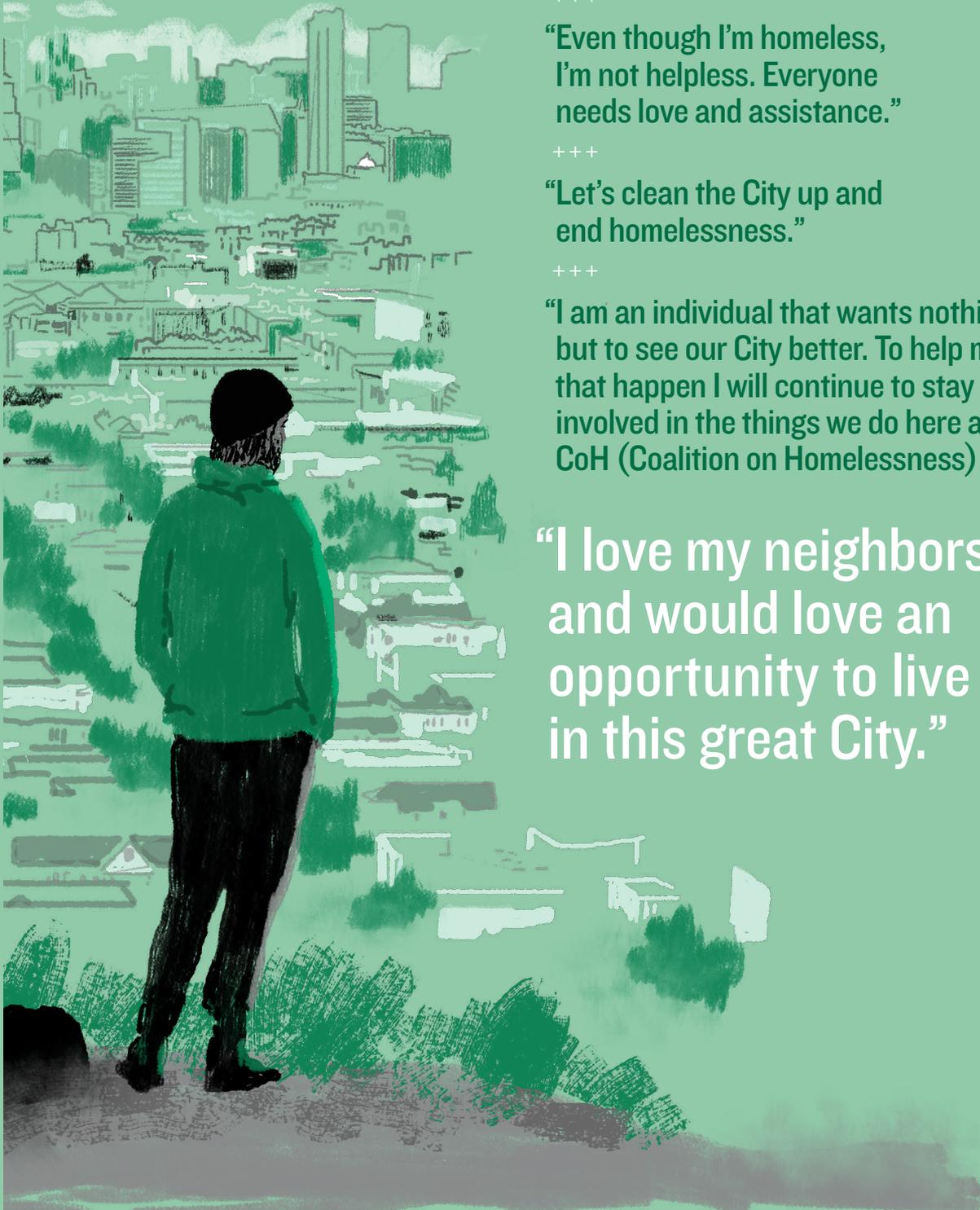
Q: HOW DO YOU THINK THINGS ARE GOING IN THE CITY RIGHT NOW?

“I love our City. It accepts everybody. It just isn’t kind to everybody. [It’s] accepting but brutal at times”

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

We Are Part of the Solution

Many of those we surveyed have visions for a city where all people can thrive. Many respondents are actively looking for solutions to homelessness and currently helping others in the community. Some respondents also noted that people living on the street have built up a degree of mutual trust—and desire to help—because they see each other all the time.



+++

“Even though I’m homeless, I’m not helpless. Everyone needs love and assistance.”

+++

“Let’s clean the City up and end homelessness.”

+++

“I am an individual that wants nothing but to see our City better. To help make that happen I will continue to stay involved in the things we do here at CoH (Coalition on Homelessness).”

“I love my neighbors and would love an opportunity to live in this great City.”

CONCLUSION

The majority of people living on the streets of San Francisco are longtime San Franciscans, kept out of housing for years on end by the lack of affordable housing opportunities. They want what anyone would want from a home: to be able to cook a meal, host family, and live private lives in the City they love. Until that happens, they are doing the best they can to survive under untenable circumstances. They want to be treated with respect, dignity, and decency. They want an end to harassment and cruelty. They want the City they love to love them back.

The people experiencing homelessness are part of the solution. They support one another in tangible ways every day and, despite being without housing, they make up the fabric of their families and communities. For any approach to solving homelessness to be successful, it must engage people experiencing homelessness as co-collaborators and experts. And any approach to solving homelessness that doesn't take into account the interwoven disparate impacts on Black communities is missing a crucial part of the story of how we got where we are—and how we can move into a future where all people have an opportunity to thrive. While many factors can lead a person into homelessness—housing discrimination, eviction, unemployment, addiction, divorce, or domestic violence—there is only one thing that can end homelessness, and that is a home.

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JOIN US

in our shared
effort to end
homelessness across
San Francisco

Visit TIPPINGPOINT.ORG/HOMELESSNESS
to learn more, sign up, and step up.

ABOUT TIPPING POINT COMMUNITY

Tipping Point Community works to break the cycle of poverty for individuals and families in the Bay Area. Since 2005, Tipping Point has raised over \$200 million to support the 1.3 million people in the Bay Area who are too poor to meet their basic needs. We leverage the resources and expertise of our community to invest in solutions that prevent poverty: a nurturing early childhood, strong education, gainful employment, and secure housing. Our board covers 100% of our overhead, so every dollar donated goes where it's needed most.

To learn more, visit TIPPINGPOINT.ORG