



## Stigmatization and Homelessness: Comprehensive Research Report

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**ABSTRACT:** *This research study investigated the forms of stigmatization that persons experiencing homelessness in San Diego commonly encounter and the consequences, both personal and collective, of stigmatization. Interviews with individuals who have past or present experience with homelessness revealed many obstacles and forms of trauma that result from their social stigmatization. Our research team also analyzed a major news source in San Diego to gauge how the media frames homelessness and we interviewed local religious leaders and elected officials to learn what strategies (if any) they employ to address stigmatization. The triangulation of these data sources reveals patterns as well as opportunities for addressing stigmatization moving forward.<sup>1,2</sup>*

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### PART 1: FRAMING THE ISSUE

San Diego has the fifth largest population of persons experiencing homelessness out of any city in the United States.<sup>3</sup> According to the 2020 [Point in Time Count](#), which is an annual attempt to document how many persons are living on our streets or in shelters, there were a minimum of 7,619 individuals experiencing homelessness in the county. Homelessness is a complex and intersectional issue and solving it will require innovative ideas and partnerships from many persons and groups across our region.

Changing the realities of homelessness will also require addressing persistent myths about homelessness, which can create obstacles to supporting and empowering those facing housing insecurity. Some San Diegans believe that those experiencing homelessness “just need to get a job” or work harder if they want to pull themselves off the streets. Others think that San Diego attracts unsheltered individuals from other parts of the country due to the beautiful weather in Southern California. However, data from the Point in Time Count dispels these and other misconceptions and can help us all to take a more human-centered and effective approach to this work.

Consider the following statistics: Nearly 80% of individuals who became homeless were already living in San Diego when they ended up on the streets or in shelters. Of those, 58% report having a disability,

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<sup>1</sup> Our research team included three faculty members at the University of San Diego -- Kate DeConinck, Th.D. (Theology & Religious Studies), Mike Williams, J.D., Ph.D. (Political Science), and Jillian Tullis, Ph.D. (Communication Studies) -- as well as three undergraduate researchers. Shelby Little (USD '21) served as the lead undergraduate researcher while Natasha Skrypek (USD '21) and Molly Feeney (USD '20) contributed in meaningful ways to the earlier phases of the project.

<sup>2</sup> This research project was made possible through a generous research grant from the Lucky Duck Foundation. We also wish to acknowledge the special role that Tom Mulvaney, Drew Moser, and Deborah Ruane played in supporting this work as well as the feedback and support that we received from colleagues at other universities across San Diego. Finally, Kris Kuntz, Chief Policy Officer at the Regional Task Force on the Homeless, provided valuable feedback about our report and recommendations.

<sup>3</sup> More precisely, San Diego has the fifth-largest population of persons experiencing homelessness out of all Continuums of Care (CoCs) in the country. San Diego's CoC is county-wide.

with 37% disclosing a mental health condition, and 31% reporting substance abuse. Some individuals faced these issues before they lost their housing, but others have developed serious medical or other conditions as a result of their time on the streets. The realities of homelessness are also tied to systems and policies that discriminate against certain citizens based on race, sexual orientation, or other factors. As just one example, Black persons make up about 4.7% of the general population in San Diego County but 21% of the population of persons experiencing unsheltered homelessness and 30% of those living in shelters. There are a wide range of reasons why persons can end up in these circumstances such as domestic violence, an unforeseen medical emergency, tensions with one's parents due to unaccepted sexual orientation, other traumatic events, and, perhaps most especially the dire lack of housing that is affordable in San Diego, where the median price of a home is \$500,000 and where wages and public assistance have not kept pace.

## **PART 2: STIGMA & ITS CONSEQUENCES**

Being housing insecure is a hard way to live. Imagine waking up every morning unsure where you are going to shower, wondering whether your belongings will be taken if you have to leave them in a public place, and if you will be woken up in the middle of the night by police officers or, worse, someone trying to physically harm or assault you. Additionally, social stigmatization only serves to amplify the burden that individuals and families often carry.

*Stigma* is a social phenomenon that occurs through interaction or communication in which an individual or group with a particular attribute or characteristic is devalued by others (Belcher and DeForge 2012). Stigma can take many different forms: labeling, stereotyping, separating (us vs. them), status loss, discrimination, and more. Stigmatized individuals are viewed as flawed and are dehumanized. Beyond excluding certain people from society, stigmatization also leads to blaming the individual rather than acknowledging--and potentially transforming--the role that powerful others and social structures play. Combating the stigma surrounding homelessness must be a priority because stigma inhibits public policy change.

***Combating stigma often persists long into an individual's life even after they become housed.***

While there is existing scholarship that examines the relationship between stigmatization and homelessness broadly, this research project delved into the particular trends and manifestations in San Diego. Our research team studied these dynamics from four different but interrelated perspectives: 1) those who have past or present experience of homelessness; 2) framings in local media; 3) faith-based organizations and local communities of faith; and 4) local elected officials. The triangulation of these data sources reveals patterns as well as opportunities for addressing stigmatization moving forward.

### **PART 3: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HOMELESSNESS**

Our research team conducted in-depth interviews with 24 individuals with past or present experience of homelessness in San Diego. These interviewees represented diverse backgrounds in terms of their age, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and more, and they also claimed other varied identities as youth, veterans, parents or families, and those with chronic health conditions or mental illness. The precise reasons for which individuals became housing insecure ranged from domestic abuse to the loss of a job or a serious medical emergency. Some of our interviewees had been living in their cars, a shelter, or on the streets for a matter of weeks and others had been unhoused for years or even decades. **However, what all of our interviewees held in common was that they had experienced one or more forms of stigmatization as a result of their housing insecurity.**

The majority of those we spoke with described encounters with other San Diegans in which others assumed them to be “drug addicts,” “lazy,” “mentally ill,” or “dirty.” They also described how they have been rendered “invisible” in one way or another, either in the ways that others averted their eyes when walking past them on the street or in how their own sense of shame led them to hide their struggles from their employers, schools, friends, or family. The consequences of stigmatization are tremendous and affect individuals’ physical and mental health. One interviewee witnessed a horrific physical attack on an unhoused friend while they were living on the streets and how the attacker shouted derogatory comments throughout the incident. Another interviewee noted the lack of trust they have towards others--including well-intentioned case managers or service providers--after years of being manipulated or mistreated by so many people. The consequences of self-stigma should also not be underestimated. After years of being treated as if they are “nothing,” some people lose all sense of hope or self-esteem, sometimes even coming to believe that they deserve the conditions in which they are living. The forms of stigmatization an unhoused individual might face are deeply intersectional, meaning that those who are Black, who identify as LGBTQIA+, or who claim other identities that are commonly marginalized in our world today can face additional layers or types of stigmatization. In addition, 65% of the unsheltered or formerly unsheltered individuals who we interviewed for this project, mentioned negative encounters with the police. These experiences were especially prevalent among Black, Native, and other persons of color who we interviewed. Treatment of this sort often resulted in a deep sense of shame, which was noted even by those who had secured housing. The trauma of stigmatization often persists long into an individual’s life even after they become housed.

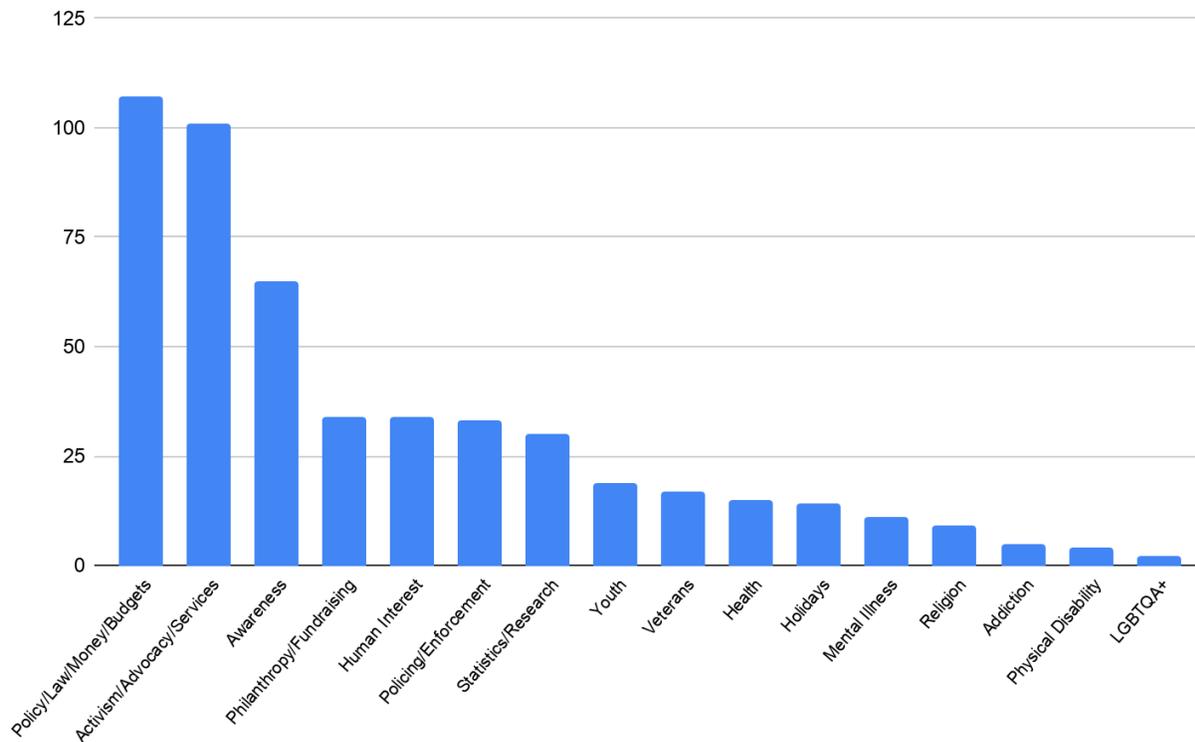
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## PART 4: HOMELESSNESS AND STIGMA IN LOCAL NEWS REPORTING

This portion of the project centered around media coverage about homelessness in the *San Diego Union-Tribune* to understand the media representation of homelessness in the county and how this representation might contribute to stigmatization of people who are experiencing homelessness. According to the *Union-Tribune's* About Us page, the organization is San Diego's largest media company and reaches 96% of households in the region (About US, SanDiegoUnionTribune.com). While the *Union-Tribune* may have a significant reach, people do not consume the news by reading a print copy of the paper daily, they now have the option to access the news online. Data from Similarweb.com indicate that visitors to SanDiegoUnionTribune.com spend less than 90 seconds on a page and view just over 1.5 pages per visit. This means that many readers are only skimming over the online articles without reading the content in full, which makes the framing and imagery of each piece particularly important. The analysis of news coverage then, was limited to photos, headlines, and bylines rather than investigating the content of news stories.

The headlines, bylines, and thumbnail photos (if available) of 393 stories about homelessness dated April 21, 2016 through October 24, 2019 were analyzed. Two coders assessed each article and in some cases one article might have been coded under more than one category. If coders disagreed about how to label a headline or byline, they discussed their rationale for one category over another until agreement was reached. Any article that was not about San Diego was eliminated from data. The following represents the themes and their frequency:

San Diego Union-Tribune Themes and Frequencies



Given the demographics of people experiencing homelessness from the Point in Time Counts, **the research team was surprised to find a dearth of headlines about LGBTQA+ youth, families, disability, African Americans, or adults 55+.** While not obvious from these figures, our review of these headlines also revealed a focus on the larger nonprofits working to combat homelessness, whose name appeared repeatedly in headlines.

The stories were coded a second time by one coder, with a specific focus on the images and headlines to determine the presence or absence of messages or visuals that might contribute to social stigma. These analyses found 79 instances of headlines or images that could contribute to social stigma. This means that approximately one out of every five articles about homelessness reinforced prevalent stigmas.

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Examples of images that were coded as potentially stigmatizing included those that relied on stereotypical depictions of homelessness, such as anonymous individuals living on the streets surrounded by their possessions. In some cases there is no person present in these photos, viewers can only see the “signs” of homelessness, such as tents or shopping carts, and because they rely on stereotypical imagery, viewers are left to fill in the interpretive blanks and infer, even without information, that this is an image of homelessness. These photos were also frequently used more than once across the articles, thus becoming a type of stock photo to represent homelessness in San Diego. While less frequent, another type of stigmatizing imagery involved police, which can perpetuate and reinforce the idea that living on the streets is a crime.

While the bulk of the headlines or images did not include stigma, those that did had some common elements. The images in particular relied on stereotypes of homelessness, even when a person was not visible. When people were present in these images, there were two types of depictions: the first included a stereotypical homeless person and the second showed a homeless person interacting with an obviously non-homeless person (e.g., volunteer, caseworker, or law enforcement officer), a contrast which only serves to elevate the differences.

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Media coverage alone only reflects part of the story, yet it is an important part of the ecosystem of stigmatization of homelessness and those who experience it. The news influences what topics we think about and can shape how we think about an issue. When media coverage is not representative of realities, readers or viewers will have a distorted view of the issues, which in turn can shape public opinion and policy. In addition, these representations can influence how we understand and interact with those who are experiencing homelessness.

## PART 5: THE ROLE OF FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS & COMMUNITIES OF FAITH

This part of the project investigated the role that faith-based organizations (FBOs) and communities of faith (CoF) across San Diego play in addressing the stigmatization of homelessness.<sup>4</sup> It is a well-documented reality that both FBOs and CoF are critical in meeting the material, spiritual, and other needs of unhoused persons.<sup>5</sup> As a result, many religious organizations and communities in San Diego are deeply attuned to the lived realities of homelessness and, drawing from their spiritual and theological worldviews, do important work to resist trends of dehumanization and other social and moral injustices.

In order to understand the ways in which leaders of local religious communities and faith-based organizations in San Diego County perceive and address the stigmatization of those experiencing homelessness, we reached out to thirty (30) such leaders via email between February and June 2020 and invited them to participate in an interview with our team. We then conducted in-depth interviews with a total of fifteen (15) individuals.<sup>6</sup> The interviews included questions about the work that they and their communities do to support and/or advocate for those experiencing homelessness, the forms of stigmatization that they have witnessed (both inside and outside of their own community) and the consequences of that stigmatization, their ways of framing homelessness through distinctly theological lenses, and more. All of these interviewees had encountered stereotypes about those who are experiencing homelessness, including assumptions that they are lazy, mentally ill, unclean, and sufferers of substance abuse. This group of interviewees were well aware that these stereotypes do not align with the realities of homelessness and most of them intentionally and actively work to reframe these prevalent assumptions. The following analysis summarizes other key findings from both FBOs and CoF:

*Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs):* Interviews with leaders and staff members affiliated with major faith-based nonprofits in San Diego revealed three common themes and challenges related to the stigmatization of homelessness.<sup>7</sup> **The first trend is that stigma or fear surrounding those who are unsheltered can create a barrier to recruiting new groups or congregations to participate in a given FBO's programs.** For example, a staff member at the Interfaith Shelter Network noted that some communities of faith who have schools or childcare on their property worry about having “addicts or alcoholics” around their children and hesitate to participate in their Rotational Shelter Program for that reason. Similar issues surfaced in interviews with leaders at other FBOs as well. However, interviews also revealed that long-term engagement with those who are unhoused significantly reduced stigmatization.

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<sup>4</sup> In the context of this project, a *faith-based organization* (FBO) can be defined as a nonprofit working in the realm of homeless services that claims affiliation with one or more faith traditions. A *community of faith* (CoF), on the other hand, can be defined as a local church, synagogue, mosque, or other house of worship that is not a formal nonprofit or provider of homeless services.

<sup>5</sup> For example, one 2017 study by [Baylor University](#) revealed that 58% of all emergency beds for persons experiencing homelessness in major U.S. cities are provided by FBOs. In San Diego specifically, more than one third of the emergency shelter beds were provided by these organizations that year.

<sup>6</sup> Of those interviewed, five were leaders or staff members at local faith-based nonprofit organizations that address homelessness and eleven were leaders of local religious communities (one person served in both capacities). Most interviewees (93%) support a Housing First model; a smaller percentage (7%) did not. Six interviewees identified as women and nine identified as men. Interviewees were diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, and religious affiliation. Religious affiliations were comprised of the following identities: Christian - Denominational (25%), Christian - Nondenominational (17%) Catholic (17%), Jewish (17%), Buddhist (8%), Muslim (8%), and Hindu/Vaishnava (8%).

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that only one of these interviewees used language and framing that was stigmatizing itself. This person described the frustrations of working with clients who are only looking for “handouts” and mentioned that individuals “need to rise to the occasion” and make an effort if they want to get off the streets. This negative tone and framing of homelessness was not evident in any of the other interviews.

Representatives from Interfaith Community Services explained that many of their faith communities have been doing work in the area of homeless services for forty years and have “regularly been exposed to positive stories” that have countered any previous assumptions or forms of stigmatization.

Interviews with leaders and staff members at local FBOs also revealed another important trend evident in their work with everyday citizens in San Diego: an increasing denial of fundamental facts or data relating to homelessness. When confronted with evidence-based arguments that challenge the persisting stereotypes surrounding homelessness, some San Diegans simply refuse to accept the facts. In one case, the leader of a local

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FBO attended the city council meeting in Encinitas at which the council approved the hotly-debated safe parking program. This leader spent most of that meeting chatting with those who were upset about the plan about their concerns. This group expressed a strong sense of tribalism, only wanting to help people from Encinitas and worrying that people from other communities were coming (and would come) to be homeless in their area. The leader of the FBO recounted: “I have lots of data about how that isn’t true, so I shared some of that data in a conversation with someone that night. And she just said, ‘That’s wrong. That’s not true. Your data is false.’” Even after explaining how the data was collected, this leader was still met with resistance from this individual who told him she would not believe his facts and accused him of “faking everything.” Situations like these have caused many FBOs to rework their strategies for addressing misconceptions and stigmatization. All of these organizations have pivoted in one way or another to using personal stories to try to change minds and hearts. As this same leader put it: “We don’t think statistics change anyone’s mind but we think stories and personal connections do. So I try to tell a lot of stories in my presentations and talks with people.”<sup>8</sup>

**A third and final challenge that FBOs face in relation to the stigmatization of homelessness is working with a contingency of donors and other partners who, based on their own assumptions about those who are experiencing homelessness, refuse to support affordable housing or low-barrier programs.**

For example, one leader of a local FBO told me that some donors want to set fixed, short limits on how long a person should be allowed to live in an affordable housing unit. Such donors do not think it makes sense for individuals to live in this housing for longer than six or nine months and that once people have been “fixed” they should leave and open up those units for others. However, as the leader of this FBO expressed, many of those who need this housing carry forms of trauma or other challenges that are not likely to be resolved quickly or at all. This leader stated, “Not everyone can pay market rate and especially not in a city like San Diego. And, some people don’t understand that if we were to pull affordable housing from [a client] then they’ll be back on the street within a relatively short period of time. There is nothing wrong with that client, it’s just the nature of how expensive it is here.” This leader

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<sup>8</sup> All of the FBOs interviewed as part of this research project have gravitated toward the strategy of storytelling as a means of humanizing those who are unhoused. Their websites contain one or more pages with stories about everyday San Diegans who became housing insecure for complex reasons. Some of these websites acknowledge a fuller range of experiences than others, but all attempt to paint a human portrait. While storytelling does play an important role in combating the stigmatization of homelessness, it is important to remember that stories alone do not necessarily lead to widespread social change or shifts in public policies. There is also the danger, noted by some interviewees, of “preaching to the choir” -- meaning that those who are exposed to these stories tend to be those who actively seek them out.

noted that, more times than not, his organization is able to shift thought processes like these among donors and other partners; however, many self-made individuals believe that others must simply work harder and “pull themselves up by their bootstraps.”

*Communities of Faith (CoF):* As was the case with leaders and staff members at local FBOs, those associated with CoF in San Diego play an important role in supporting those who are experiencing homelessness and also encounter the stigmatization of homelessness in their work. Interviews with leaders at different CoF across San Diego revealed that these individuals were attuned to the challenges that unhoused individuals face and are doing important work to combat stigma. First, religious leaders are able to cultivate new ways of perceiving homelessness drawing from their unique theological texts and traditions. Many religious traditions emphasize the inherent dignity of all persons, the sacredness of human life, and the duty to care for those who are most vulnerable in society. The specific theological framing of these core ideas shifts across different religions, though, and many local CoF have developed unique ways of discussing homelessness in keeping with their core values, traditions, or texts. For example, the imam of a local mosque shares stories about the way that Muhammed himself used to care for those without shelter, while many Catholics frame their work through their beliefs in the dignity of all persons and Christ’s preferential option for the poor. The religious leaders that we interviewed are leading important initiatives to meet the basic needs of those who are unhoused: providing meals, showers, hygiene kits, and/or clothing through formal or informal programs.

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**Additionally, some CoF are going one step beyond charity work by engaging in advocacy work or developing innovative solutions to the housing crisis.** One of our interviewees mentioned that a developer had approached his CoF to ask for their support on a new affordable housing complex that they were proposing in the neighborhood, and so this leader and his community began to publicly voice their support.<sup>9</sup> Other CoF are making creative use of structures and spaces that already exist to provide housing to those currently on the streets. Two of our interviewees mentioned that they unofficially allow unhoused individuals with cars to use their parking lots at night. Another church began a grassroots effort at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to house unsheltered neighbors in their area within parishioners’ homes.<sup>10</sup> Thus, churches and other CoF may make valuable partners as San Diego continues to consider shared housing and other models such as host homes. There is also a growing YIGBY (Yes in God’s Backyard) movement in the greater San Diego region that is inspiring many CoF to consider new forms of engaging with this issue. These interviews revealed that CoF are doing important work to reframe homelessness, are already working with many unsheltered individuals in their neighborhoods, and have a deep commitment to social justice and moral accountability to one’s neighbors.

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<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that only one interviewee mentioned being approached by a developer for support on an affordable housing project. This indicates that there may be ways of better involving CoF in strategies to garner support for such projects.

<sup>10</sup> Many of the small CoF involved in this research indicated that they would be able to sustain some of these short-term offerings if there were just a small amount of funding available to support that work. Past experiences have led many of them to believe that funding is always awarded to the same pool of “major players” and that there is no interest in supporting smaller, grassroots projects. Others see the grant applications as too cumbersome and complicated for a small CoF to handle on its own. Without access to a team of grant writers or individuals who can commit hours each week to grant processes, these CoF feel limited in terms of what they can apply for and, thus, limited in the work they are able to do.

## **PART 6: THE ROLE OF ELECTED OFFICIALS**

In San Diego County, there are a total of eighteen cities, varying greatly with respect to the number of reported individuals experiencing homelessness. In order to understand the ways in which local elected officials in San Diego County address the issue of the stigmatization of those experiencing homelessness, we contacted forty-five (45) elected officials via email from February through June 2020. We conducted in-depth interviews with a total of twelve (12) elected officials.<sup>11</sup>

While the interviews revealed important information about the particular policies that have been adopted in different cities, the main focus of the interviews was to determine the extent to which elected officials understand the issue of homelessness, the attitudes they have about those experiencing homelessness, the attitudes that their constituents express about those experiencing homelessness, and the strategies (if any) elected officials utilized to change their attitudes or the attitudes of their constituents. Understanding these issues is critical if we expect elected officials to adopt policies that support those experiencing homelessness and if we expect them to persuade their constituents of the necessity of these policies.

There are several important trends with respect to elected leaders' understanding of the issue of homelessness and the issue of stigmatization. First, a vast majority of the interviewees had very little experience with the issue of homelessness before being elected. In addition, most of the interviewees told us that it was not an issue in their campaigns. There were a variety of reasons why this was the case, but for many, the most important factor was that the issue of homelessness was not relevant for the particular district they sought office.<sup>12</sup> While we should not expect all local government elected officials to be "experts" on an issue as complex as homelessness, the interviewees stressed that once elected to their positions, homelessness became one of the most important issues that they dealt with on the city council.

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**This leads to the second trend that once elected, the interviewees told us that they were required to learn about the issue of homelessness because their city was considering a policy proposal on the issue.** Indeed, a majority of those interviewed had recently dealt with a specific policy that had produced discussion, and in some cases, controversy in their community. These interactions with constituents about policy proposals were important in terms of hearing the attitudes that those in their community had about those experiencing homelessness. When asked how they sought to "learn" about the issue of homelessness, most of the interviewees stated that they relied upon the information they received from non-profit organizations focusing on homelessness and/or talking with police officers or

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<sup>11</sup> Of those interviewed, seven were female and five were male. A total of three were members of the San Diego City Council while there were five from North County, three from East County and one from South County. Ten of the twelve officials interviewed were elected or appointed to office from 2016-19. Nine of the twelve elected officials ran for office in 2020 while three were incumbents who were not on the ballot.

<sup>12</sup> Local governments conduct either at-large elections (where every eligible voter within the city limits votes for candidates) or district elections (where only eligible voters from demarcated districts vote for candidates). In San Diego County, fourteen of the nineteen local governments conduct district elections. For the purposes of this study, this distinction is important because while homelessness might be a significant issue for a particular city as a whole, it may or may not be a significant issue in particular districts within the city.

participating in a Homeless Outreach Team (HOT) ride along. Of those interviewed, only a few elected officials talked with someone who was either currently experiencing homelessness or who had experienced homelessness in the past. A third trend in the research was that elected officials relied heavily on non-profit organizations to recommend policy options and to assist the government with the implementation of public policies. One of the results of this reliance is that cities where there is a critical mass of non-profit organizations focusing on homelessness are more likely to have more services than those cities that do not have these resources in their community.

These first three trends are central for understanding the context for the final two trends, and we think, most important finding of this section of the study: while all of the interviewees admitted that they heard negative stereotypes about those experiencing homelessness from their constituents, very few had strategies to address this stigmatization. In addition, through our conversations with the elected officials, many articulated negative stereotypes themselves while simultaneously emphasizing that they want to adopt policies to support those experiencing homelessness. This aligns with findings from other scholars on this issue that homelessness is an issue that a majority of individuals hold both “compassionate” and “judgemental” feelings about.

***[W]hile all of the interviewees admitted to have heard negative stereotypes about those experiencing homelessness from their constituents, very few had strategies to address this stigmatization.***

The types of negative stereotypes that elected officials hear from their constituents is consistent with our interviews with those who are either currently unsheltered or who have been unsheltered in the past. The arguments that constituents offer against supporting policies that support those experiencing homelessness include that they are “outsiders,” “dangerous,” “mentally ill,” “dirty,” and that such policies will make the city a “magnet” for those who are currently unsheltered.<sup>13</sup> When asked how they respond to these stereotypes, most interviewees stated that they share more “accurate” information, but that admittedly, it is difficult to persuade constituents who have these attitudes. A couple of those interviewed did add that it was effective for them to share actual stories about those experiencing homelessness - stories that contradict the negative stereotypes. Of course, because very few of the elected officials interviewed had met with those experiencing homelessness, most did not have these stories to share.

***[M]any of them are prone to either use stigmatizing language when discussing those experiencing homelessness and/or they support policies that have the effect of perpetuating stigmatization***

The final trend in our conversations with elected officials - even those who clearly committed to doing more to support those who are unsheltered - is that many of them are prone to either use stigmatizing language when discussing those experiencing homelessness and/or they support policies that have the effect of perpetuating stigmatization. For example, one interviewee stated that s/he could not allow those experiencing homelessness to “scare” customers and

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<sup>13</sup> Most of the interviewees told us that they believed that there were many in their community who did not hold negative stereotypes about those experiencing homelessness but that they heard more comments from those that did have these negative attitudes.

another one told us that most of those who are unsheltered are “mentally ill.” With respect to policies, whether the issue was providing a safe parking lot or a shelter, it was important that these services be in locations that were not visible to many people. In terms of public spaces, we were told that police must be able to “move them along” and that a known strategy in many cities is to “activate” parks so that those experiencing homelessness do not establish encampments. The impact such policies might have on the psyche of those experiencing homelessness was only mentioned in a couple of the interviews.

Housing ends homelessness and elected officials--especially in cities that control land use issues--play a critical role in the work to increase the housing supply. No matter what we do to address stigma there is always going to be a group of the general public that will not change their opinions about homelessness. Knowing this, we need to support those local elected officials who stand up for this issue and who work to create change even when facing tremendous public pressure not to do so.

## **PART 7: FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

We will not end homelessness in San Diego if we do not address stigma. Many proposed supportive housing projects have died over the years because of public pushback. Without a major shift in public perceptions of and attitudes towards those who are experiencing homelessness, we will not see changes to the policies and systems that allow homelessness to touch the lives of so many in our community. Although stigmatization is currently a major barrier to solving the homelessness crisis here in San Diego, there are many possibilities for combating this trend that emerged in the course of our research.

- **Recommendation 1** - *Dispersing humanizing, destigmatizing stories related to homelessness to broader audiences*
  - It is important to acknowledge that *Voice of San Diego*, the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, and other local news sources have done some deeply important reporting on homelessness in San Diego. In order to further shift the narrative about homelessness in directions that are less stigmatizing, news writers might consider examples such as the [Invisible Child series](#) by the *New York Times* or the [Project Homeless](#) initiative through the *Seattle Times*.
  - Models such as those shared above could be used to create a weekly column in the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, local newsletters, parish bulletins, and/or other news sources.
  - Additionally, it is imperative that groups composed of those with lived experience (e.g., HEAL, Voice of Our City Choir, the homeless Youth Action Board, and others) help shape this strategy. More broadly we must collectively consider how to better incorporate persons with lived experience in all aspects of homelessness policy, programs, funding, and more.
- **Recommendation 2** - *Providing a space and platform for intentional conversation about the stigmatization of homelessness among elected officials, religious leaders, classes and student groups, and others*
  - We have created two toolkits (one for student organizations and one for volunteer groups) that can be used to guide these conversations. These toolkits can also be tailored for other specific audiences.
  - We have also crafted a compendium of religious texts that can be used by CoF that are new to this work and looking to start conversations with their practitioners about homelessness.
  - In addition, there is a need for more formal and targeted education and trainings for elected officials (especially newly-elected officials), faith organizations, and others by policy experts and persons with lived experience.
  - Create common messaging about homelessness and ways to solve the homelessness crisis.
- **Recommendation 3** - *Facilitating conversations and interactions with those with lived experience (especially for elected officials)*
  - There are already programs available in San Diego that could meet this need (HEAL, Voices of Our City Choir, Youth Action Board, and others)
- **Recommendation 4** - *Educating front-line first responders on homelessness about the realities of homelessness and trauma.*
  - Police officers, healthcare professionals, and others often interact with those experiencing homelessness and can unknowingly further the stigmatization of these individuals.
- **Future research** to build off this pilot study could include in-depth surveys with elected officials, religious leaders, and others to further gauge the extent to which they prioritize homelessness in their work. Coding of additional news sources in San Diego could also reveal which are most likely to perpetuate stigma or dispel it.