



# Californians Speak on Homelessness: Public Perceptions of the Causes of Homelessness and Proposed Policy Recommendations



## Background

*Californians Speak on Social Welfare (CSSW)* is an ongoing survey project at California State University, Sacramento (CSUS), which seeks to regularly gauge Californians’ perceptions of community issues related to poverty, inequality, and social policy.<sup>1</sup> CSSW surveys are periodically administered online to a representative panel of approximately 1,800 Californians, called CalSPEAKS. This online panel is administered by the Institute for Social Research (ISR) at CSUS, and it is derived from probability-based sampling and weighting techniques to ensure that the survey findings are representative of the non-institutionalized adult population of California.

## Addressing the request from the California Homeless Coordinating and Financing Council

This white paper responds to the question: ***How should the state prioritize its resources to make the biggest impact to reduce homelessness, and why?***

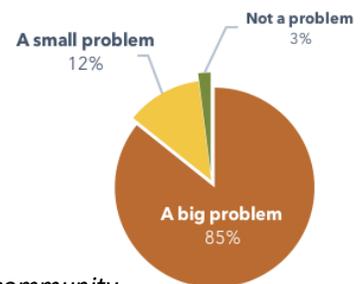
Representative and contemporary surveys are important for informing state priorities to end homelessness, as they provide insights into how community members think about homelessness as well as their support for policy alternatives.<sup>2</sup> In this white paper, we provide findings and analyses based on the second CSSW survey, conducted in 2018. One of the central objectives of that survey is to understand **Californians’ views on the causes of homelessness, perceptions of those experiencing homelessness, and attitudes about various intervention strategies, including Housing First.** Such analyses may help dispel myths, offer comparisons on regional perspectives, and shed light on common concerns across the state. Further, representative data can assist the Council prioritize effective strategies that accurately reflect the diversity of attitudes and beliefs of Californians. This assists the Council to be data-driven as it identifies resources, benefits, and services to prevent and end homelessness in California, and as it oversees implementation of Housing First guidelines and regulations.

In what follows, we highlight results from the CSSW survey, discuss implications, and present recommendations to assist the Council prioritize its resources for making the biggest impact to reduce homelessness.

## Californians on homelessness

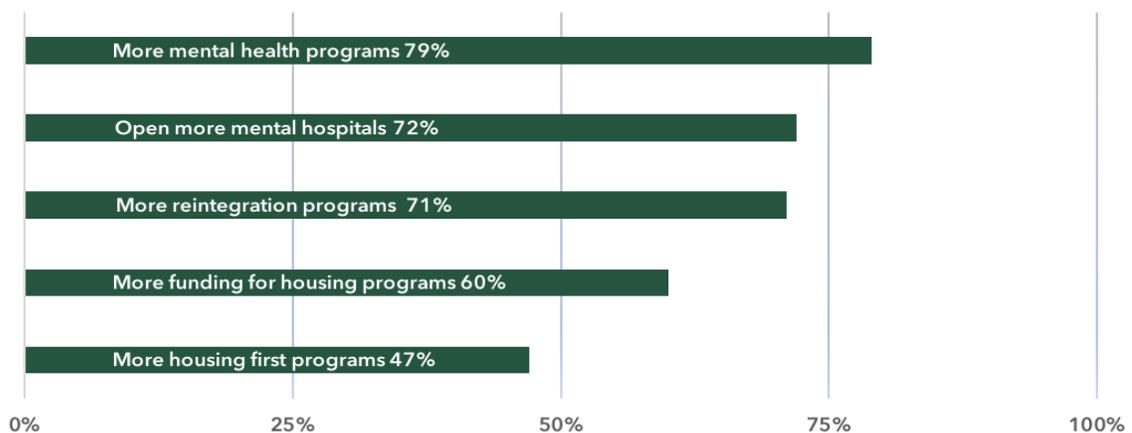
### 1. Californians are very concerned about homelessness.

- 85% of Californians believe homelessness is a “big problem” in the state.
- Local concern about homelessness varies significantly across communities; 69% of city dwellers believe homelessness is a “big problem” in their *own community* versus 48% of residents in other areas.



## 2. Californians support a variety of policy efforts to address homelessness, but they are ambivalent about Housing First.

- 69% of Californians believe that society has a responsibility to help individuals experiencing homelessness, and 79% believe that there are specific things that the state can do to prevent homelessness more generally.
- **54% of Californians would agree to higher taxes if the state invested in these efforts.**
- When asked about general types of policy initiatives and programs, Californians report a range of support, from 47-79% stating agreement as shown in the below figure. General patterns of this support include:
  - Nearly 80% of Californians feel more *mental health programs* are needed in the community, and 72% believe that more mental health hospitals need to be opened in the state.
  - Over 70% of Californians favor increasing programs to *(re)integrate* individuals transitioning out of the military, prison, and foster care into the community.
  - 60% of Californians feel that the state should invest *more funding in housing programs and policies*.



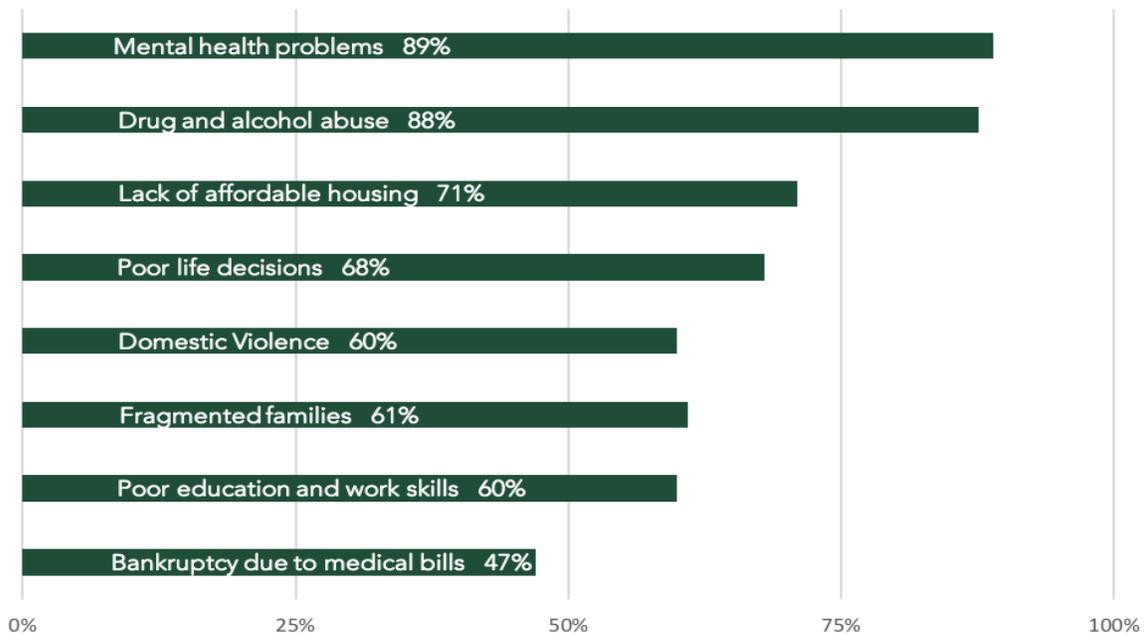
- When asked about **Housing First** programs in particular, Californians were ambivalent in their support compared to other policy alternatives.
  - **47% of Californians say that the state should increase Housing First programs that “provide housing without conditions.”**

It is likely that many Californians have limited understanding of the Housing First model (despite the brief definition provided to survey respondents) or how it is implemented. Nonetheless, findings suggest that a **majority of Californians endorse attitudes that are antithetical to the Housing First model**. Nearly 60% believe that homelessness interventions should “promote better personal decisions in exchange for housing.”

## 3. Most Californians primarily associate homelessness with personal-level challenges. Nonetheless, many Californians also believe that affordable housing is a key driver in the state.

- When asked about various factors that can contribute to homelessness, Californians were more likely to attribute importance to individual-level challenges. **Three of the top four selected factors were related to mental health (89%), substance use (88%), and poor life decisions (68%).**

- Despite the emphasis of individual-level factors, **72% of Californians nonetheless agree that affordable housing is an important contributor to homelessness.**

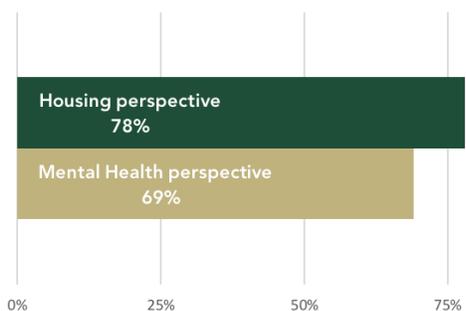


**4. Perspectives on the causes of homelessness seem to shape support for specific policy solutions.**

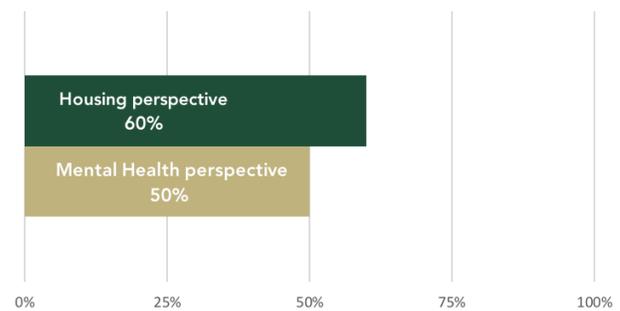
As reported above, **9 out of 10 Californians believe that mental health and substance use are key contributors to homelessness and 7 out of 10 see that affordable housing is an important driver in the state.**

- Among those who understand homelessness from the **lens of mental health**, **50% support Housing First programs** and 69% support more funding for housing programs.
- Among those who understand homelessness from the **lens of affordable housing**, **60% support Housing First programs** and 78% support increased funding for housing programs.

Increase funding for housing programs



Increase "housing first" programs



**Discussion**

Californians are ready to engage and support solutions to the housing crisis and eager to see that fewer people experience homelessness in the state. The *Californians Speak on Social Welfare (CSSW)* survey project at California State University, Sacramento, provides ongoing measures of public attitudes and perceptions on this on and other

important issues related to social welfare. As the results from 2018 show, **ending homelessness in California is as much a technical problem as it is a political problem**; one that requires both strategy and planning as well as public engagement, sound prioritization, and important decision-making.

In the Council's call for papers, it asks for strategies the State of California should employ to make the largest difference in multiple goals aimed at reducing and preventing incidences of homelessness. **Californians believe that homelessness results from a confluence of individual and structural factors. They believe that solutions lie in building transitions that (re)integrate individuals into their communities** (including Veterans, young adults aging-out of the foster system, and rehabilitated and released prisoners). They also support funding housing programs; however, it seems that **they need to learn more about *Housing First* as a model for intervention**.

As the CSSW data shows above, survey research is a useful strategy that the Council can employ to foster broad engagement and gain perspective as it works toward meeting the goals indicated in its call for white papers and also those mandated by Legislature in SB 1380.



## Policy Recommendations

- **Pursue strategies to educate the public about *Housing First*** as an approach to quickly and successfully connect targeted individuals and families experiencing homelessness to permanent housing and supportive services.
- **Develop strategies and housing programs that provide housing and promote (re)integration at key life transition points**, such as when individuals leave the military, when young adults exit the foster system, and when rehabilitated prisoners are released.
- **Leverage public consensus on the importance of affordable housing in addressing and combating homelessness** – that is, prioritize strategies focused on finding solutions for more affordable housing across the State.
- **Further develop and support programs that focus on both prevention and treatment of mental health conditions**, including funding for local and state mental health hospitals.
- **Perform ongoing public and stakeholder survey and focus group research** to guide and validate the Council's work to combat homelessness. Metrics should also be set to gauge public awareness and engagement with the Council's priorities, its work, and the strides being made toward ending homelessness in California.

## References

<sup>1</sup> For more technical information on CalSPEAKS, go to: [www.csus.edu/isr/calspeaks](http://www.csus.edu/isr/calspeaks)

<sup>2</sup> Tighe, J. R. (2010). Public opinion and affordable housing: A review of the literature. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 25(1), 3-17.

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