

Homelessness Response Guide



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Introduction

In 2024, the number of people experiencing homelessness in the United States reached a record high, with the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) finding 771,480 unhoused people living in sheltered and unsheltered settings on a single night across the nation. The national shelter bed inventory also saw a 13% increase in use in 2024, with 60% of those individuals having been homeless previously. Homelessness is a complex issue influenced by many factors, including housing affordability, inflation, wage stagnation, and the expiration of pandemic-era support (e.g., eviction protections, emergency rental assistance). In turn, addressing homelessness is a multifaceted challenge that requires attention and investment from a range of community stakeholders.

Although many community-based agencies currently implement interventions for people experiencing homelessness, including programs related to housing, mental and physical health, substance use, transportation, and financial and employment assistance, local law enforcement is often called upon to respond to homelessness-related issues in their communities. This reliance on law enforcement responses stems from officers' 24/7 availability and their responsibility to respond to calls for service on diverse public order and safety issues. Community members look to law enforcement to manage people experiencing homelessness in their jurisdictions through the enforcement of local ordinances that restrict their movements and/or reduce their visibility in communities (e.g., see Donley & Wright, 2008;

Fang, 2009; Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008; Kushel et al., 2005; McNeil et al., 2005). As a result, officers are often called to respond to situations involving people experiencing homelessness that would not otherwise warrant police attention (Chamard, 2010). Despite this context, law enforcement typically receives limited guidance on how to respond safely and effectively to homelessness in their communities (Hipple, Allison et al., 2024).. Although a growing body of literature provides critical insights into homelessness responses, to date, no national guidance has been published to inform law enforcement responses to people experiencing homelessness.

About This Guide

This guide offers considerations and recommendations for law enforcement responses to homelessness. It focuses on responses to individuals who are 18 years of age or older and are **chronically homeless**; that is, individuals who spend extended periods of time without housing.¹ The content of this guide is informed by research and best practices on law enforcement responses to homelessness, including applied research conducted by the authors that involved visiting police departments with functioning homelessness response units and gathering perspectives from key stakeholders in homelessness responses.

We begin this guide by examining chronic homelessness, including what it is, who

¹ This guide does not address law enforcement responses to unaccompanied youth homelessness. Individuals under the age of 18 typically are not chronically homeless nor found in adult shelters or encampments. Further, the underlying causes of youth homelessness can be different than those of chronic homelessness (National Network for Youth, n.d.).

experiences it, and what factors contribute to it. We also discuss the impact of chronic homelessness on individuals, the environment, and communities. Next, we offer considerations for developing responses to chronic homelessness, including identifying key partners, asking the right questions and accessing data for problem analysis, developing tailored strategies, and measuring effectiveness. We conclude with key takeaways for developing law enforcement responses to chronic homelessness.

The Problem of Chronic Homelessness

The experience of being homeless exists on a continuum. Some people are episodically homeless, cycling between being housed and unhoused, while others are chronically homeless (Bullen, 2023; Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Lee et al., 2010; Nino et al., 2009). Short-term periods of homelessness are much more likely to be publicly invisible because these individuals may stay briefly in shelters or find another form of temporary housing. In contrast, chronically homeless individuals are typically more visible in communities because they sleep on the streets, live in encampments, or reside in other makeshift shelters (Rankin, 2021). Anecdotal evidence suggests that police homeless specialty units spend more than 85% of their time responding to chronically homeless individuals (see, Hipple et al., 2025).

Chronic homelessness is defined in terms of both medical diagnoses and the duration and frequency of an individual's homelessness experience. Specifically, an individual is considered chronically homeless if they have a disability and have been "continuously experiencing homelessness for one year or more or [have] experienced at least four episodes of homelessness in the last three years where the combined length of time experiencing homelessness on those occasions is at least 12 months" (de Sousa & Henry, 2024, p. ix; see also, National Academies of Sciences Medicine & Public Health Practice, 2018). A critical aspect of this definition is the inclusion of physical, mental, or emotional factors that affect an individual's ability to work. According to HUD, more than 152,000 individuals experienced chronic homelessness in 2024, twice as many as observed in 2016 and the largest number ever captured by HUD's

data-collection efforts. In 2024, it was estimated that one in every three individuals experiencing homelessness showed patterns of chronic homelessness (de Sousa & Henry, 2024).

The number of chronically homeless individuals across cities varies significantly. In 2024, nearly 60% of chronically homeless individuals were counted (observed) in the 50 largest U.S. cities, with just over 20% counted in suburban areas. Further, approximately 70% of chronically homeless individuals reside in unsheltered locations, a percentage that has remained relatively stable over time. Despite declines in homelessness among specific groups (i.e., veterans) since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of people experiencing chronic homelessness has not only persisted but has steadily increased in recent years (de Sousa & Henry, 2024). The greatest increase was seen between 2023 and 2024, which witnessed a 7% rise in chronically homeless people throughout the United States.

Who Are the Chronically Homeless?

Individuals experiencing chronic homelessness are often the "face" of homelessness, especially in larger urban environments (Lee & Farrell, 2005). Data collected during Point-in-Time Counts do not include the demographic information of these individuals, but prior research provides some understanding of who they are and the differences between them and other groups experiencing homelessness (see Nino et al., 2009).

The chronically homeless tend to be individuals, rather than families, who are unsheltered or living in unsafe places (e.g., abandoned buildings, woods) (de Sousa & Henry, 2024). Additionally, they tend to be male (Agha et al., 2023) and older than people experiencing more episodic periods of homelessness (Agha et al., 2023; Calvo et al., 2020; Kuhn & Culhane, 1998; McDonald et al., 2007). These individuals are also more likely to have histories of substance use and experiences with the criminal justice system, and they tend to lack social support from family and friends (Agha et al., 2023; Caton et al., 2005; Kuhn & Culhane, 1998; Nino et al., 2009; North et al., 1998). People demonstrating patterns of chronic homelessness are also more likely to experience diminished motivation, fear, and difficulty establishing trust, all of which hinder access to services (Farrell, 2010; Piliavin et al., 1993), increasing their likelihood of negative physical and mental health outcomes (Israel et al., 2010).

Factors Contributing to Chronic Homelessness

Many factors are believed to contribute to homelessness, including the national affordable housing crisis, increasing inflation, and wage stagnation for lower- and middle-class working families (de Sousa & Henry, 2024). These factors have been exacerbated by public health crises and the end of many homelessness prevention programs that were started during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there have been increases in the number of individuals demonstrating patterns of chronic homelessness in the last several years, the full economic impact of the global pandemic has yet to be seen (Alcendor et al., 2024; Harvard Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2020; Iwundu, 2024).

The shortage of affordable housing is the most important factor in determining who becomes homeless (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Goodison et al., 2020; Munthe-Kaas et al., 2018:3; National Academies of Sciences Medicine & Public Health Practice, 2018). Various market conditions, including rising housing values, housing availability and affordability, rental prices, and stagnant wages, significantly impact housing markets and disproportionately affect lower-income families' ability to buy or rent housing. Moreover, economic factors, including poverty, low-paying jobs, unemployment, bad credit ratings, and unequal wealth distribution, are closely related to people's inability to afford and access housing (Nino et al., 2009; The Council of Economic Advisors, 2019). Social safety nets that help prevent people from becoming homeless are also lacking. The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness (2024) highlights key contributors to homelessness, including years-long housing voucher waitlists; challenges with accessing mental health treatment; and people being released from foster care, correctional facilities, and hospitals without a clear discharge-related housing plan.

More generally, the demand for housing is high, but the supply is low. According to the National Low Income Housing Coalition (Harati et al., 2025, p. 4), "there were only 35 units of affordable housing² available for every 100 extremely low income households" across the United States in 2024. While the shortage of affordable housing is a nationwide issue, housing accessibility rates vary significantly by community, and these rates correlate with the number of homeless people in a community (Colburn & Aldern, 2022; Garcia et al., 2024). Since individuals and families must allocate a larger share of their income to housing due to higher costs, more people are having difficulty paying rent. As a result, eviction rates

² Affordable housing is defined as "housing units with rent and utilities that do not exceed 30% of a given income threshold."

have increased, and more people are experiencing homelessness.

Other issues, such as mental illness, substance use, health crises, and physical or sexual abuse, are also important factors that can increase an individual's likelihood of experiencing homelessness. These experiences can impact a person's ability to obtain and maintain employment, build a social network that can offer support, and they often increase an individual's contact with the criminal justice system (see Booth et al., 2002; Garcia et al., 2024; Hallam et al., 2022). A systematic review of the literature on the predictors of homelessness showed that psychiatric concerns, drug use, and a history of suicide attempts increase a person's risk of homelessness (Nilsson et al., 2019). When these issues go untreated, services and social support are lacking, and/or public tolerance of behaviors tied to mental health disabilities is limited, the number of individuals experiencing homelessness tends to increase (Coalition on Homelessness, 2020). Indeed, many people experiencing homelessness have reported that their own or a family member's health issues contributed to their homelessness (Garcia et al., 2024).

Impact of Chronic Homelessness

Chronic homelessness has significant effects on the individuals experiencing homelessness, the environment, and communities. The scope and nature of these effects across these categories are described in greater detail below.

IMPACT OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS ON INDIVIDUALS

Chronic homelessness and health. Overall, homelessness negatively affects physical and mental health, causing the chronically homeless to experience a variety of health-related issues

(Garcia et al., 2024; Hwang et al., 2005; Lee et al., 2010; Morrison, 2009; Nino et al., 2009). In general, homeless individuals have been found to have higher rates of lung and heart disease, seizures, and hypertension compared to the general population (Hwang et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2010). Because the chronically homeless often live in harsh, unsheltered conditions with less access to methods to support hygiene and sanitation, they are particularly vulnerable to numerous illnesses and diseases (Gerrity et al., 2022). As a result, the chronically homeless are more likely to be high utilizers of emergency hospital services (Nino et al., 2009), which tend to be more expensive than preventative or outpatient treatment (Caton et al., 2007). Of all the services accessed by those experiencing chronic homelessness, healthcare has been found to make up around 50% of the total costs.

In addition to physical health, mental health concerns are a significant issue for chronically homeless individuals. The chronically homeless have more psychiatric and substance use problems compared to individuals who experience homelessness episodically (Hallam et al., 2022; Kertesz et al., 2005). More than 60% of those experiencing chronic homelessness exhibit mental health concerns (Nino et al., 2009), and approximately 25% of homeless individuals have serious mental illnesses, including schizophrenia and bipolar disorder, which is seven times the rate of people who have serious mental disabilities in the general population (Hallam et al., 2022; Nino et al., 2009; Sullivan et al., 2000).

Of particular concern is the simultaneous presence of other diseases and medical concerns in the chronically homeless population. Compared to nonchronically homeless individuals, those experiencing chronic homelessness are more likely to have both mental health concerns and substance use disorders. Additionally, the

chronically homeless have reported higher instances of simultaneous lifetime mental illness, lifetime substance use disorders, and serious medical issues compared to nonchronically homeless individuals. All of these health concerns increase individuals' likelihood of remaining homeless. Furthermore, the combination of these health concerns means that the chronically homeless experience a higher risk of mortality compared to other homeless groups and four times greater risk than seen in the general population (Funk et al., 2022; Nino et al., 2009; Richards & Kuhn, 2023).

Victimization of the chronically homeless. People experiencing homelessness are significantly more likely to be victimized compared to the general population (Cohen et al., 1988; Ellsworth, 2019; Fitzpatrick et al., 1993; Fitzpatrick et al., 1999; Meinbresse et al., 2014). Generally, living unprotected in open spaces, which is often associated with crime, leads to vulnerability to victimization and fear of crime (Biro & Turanovic; Fischer, 1992; Fitzpatrick et al., 1999; Kipke et al., 1997; McCarthy & Hagan, 2024). While reported victimization rates vary due to research inclusion criteria and methodology, the various estimates are alarming. One estimate suggests that 74–87% of those experiencing homelessness have been victims of a crime, with mental health concerns increasing the probability of being victimized (Russell, 2020). Similarly, Meinbresse et al. (2014) conclude that nearly 50% of homeless individuals have been crime victims. Moreover, they find that approximately 31% know their attackers and 28% are under the influence of drugs or alcohol when victimized. In addition, 58% of these attacks occur in streets or alleys, and 15% are motivated by hate. Women experiencing homelessness are also at a higher risk of sexual victimization (Meanwell, 2012; Melander & Tyler, 2010).

Another area of concern related to the victimization of homeless individuals is bias-motivated violent attacks. Gruenewald et al. (2013) explore bias-motivated homicides involving victims targeted because of their status as unhoused. They find that while such attacks occur infrequently, they include especially vicious homicides that tend to receive considerable media coverage. Indeed, nearly half of anti-homeless homicides occur with blunt objects rather than guns, and surprisingly, homeless victims are as likely to be burned as shot to death. Typically, these attacks happen late at night in public parks or under bridges and involve multiple younger offenders who already have a criminal record (Allison & Klein, 2021). Similar results are presented in a study comparing the characteristics of anti-homeless homicides to anti-LGBT and anti-race/ethnicity homicides (Gruenewald & Allison, 2018).

IMPACT OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS ON THE ENVIRONMENT

Pollution and biological contaminants. Many chronically homeless individuals reside in unsheltered areas, including encampments. While not much is known about the specific impacts of chronic homelessness on the environment, research has been conducted on the impacts of unsheltered homelessness and encampments. Unsheltered homelessness and living in encampments result in homeless individuals' belongings being outside, with discarded items remaining in the environment. Common pollutants generated by homeless individuals include trash, plastic debris, shopping carts, shelter materials like tarps and cardboard, fabrics like blankets and clothing, cigarette butts, and illegal drug paraphernalia. These pollutants have long-lasting effects on the environment. Trash breakdown produces microplastics, while debris can enter waterways and travel far distances from its entry point (Doerschlag, 2021). Additionally, unsheltered homelessness and encampments

produce biological contaminants through human waste due to a lack of access to sanitation options. Human waste can increase bacterial levels and introduce a biohazard risk to the local environment, threatening both wildlife and water quality (Gomez, 2019).

Environmental destruction and fire risk. Unsheltered homelessness and the presence of encampments mean that groups are living in spaces not meant for human habitation, requiring individuals to change the surrounding environment to suit their needs. Homeless individuals have been found to remove vegetation for trailblazing or for shelter construction, including cutting down trees to obtain lumber to strengthen a shelter and removing ground cover to clear space for habitation (Gomez, 2019). Similarly, they may alter the physical landscape to better suit their needs, for example, by flattening an area to make it easier to set up a living space, an act known as terracing (White, 2014). Unsheltered homelessness also introduces a wildfire risk due to the need to cook food or heat an outdoor living space. Human-caused wildfires are a great concern for the environment because they destroy natural habitats and can cause injury to homeless individuals and other community members, destroying their belongings (Doerschlag, 2021).

IMPACT OF CHRONIC HOMELESSNESS ON COMMUNITIES

Public safety and property values. In communities, chronic homelessness can cause a lower sense of public safety and decrease property values near homeless encampments. Indeed, the public often feels uncomfortable in or fearful of areas with services geared toward people experiencing homelessness (Orr et al., 2024). Encampments themselves also impact public safety and security due to the general public no longer feeling comfortable in the area surrounding an encampment due to the health risks and low-level

disorder that can occur near them (Police Executive Research Forum, 2018; Tremoulet et al., 2012). This discomfort around encampments and homeless individuals is believed to result in lowered property values, though evidence on the actual rates of property values varies (Orr et al., 2024).

Some jurisdictions have responded to this decreased sense of public safety by criminalizing homelessness, which has resulted in high public safety costs from arresting and incarcerating homeless people (Bauman et al., 2019). The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness has found that a chronically homeless individual can cost \$30,000 to \$50,000 per year, partially due to the costs associated with the criminal justice system (Bauman et al., 2016). Generally, the cycle of arresting and jailing homeless people, who typically cannot afford to pay any fees or fines related to their crimes, costs the public greatly (Chambers & Brakenhoff, 2023). Moreover, as the problem grows, resources must be increasingly expended to respond effectively to homelessness.

Visibility and businesses. Places with a high concentration of homeless individuals can create significant tension among the people experiencing homelessness, business owners, development organizations, chambers of commerce, trade associations, and individuals who work or use these spaces in their day-to-day lives. The visibility of homelessness in spaces can deter others from using them, thereby affecting businesses. This concern is particularly notable for cities that rely on tourism to support their infrastructure (Seo et al., 2021).

This tension has led to various responses to homelessness, including increasing police presence in these concentrated areas. In some cities, property owners and business stakeholders have formed business improvement districts that fund projects and services to improve specific areas and make them more “business friendly.” These efforts

involve responding to homelessness through funding outreach programs, police or private security responses, and clean-up projects (Lee, 2018). Notably, business improvement districts have been criticized for being anti-homeless by advocating for the adoption of local ordinances that criminalize homelessness and prioritize law enforcement to remove people experiencing homelessness from designated public spaces (Herring, 2014; Steel & Symes, 2005).

Given these cumulative effects on individuals, the environment, and communities, responding effectively to chronic homelessness is imperative. Rankin (2021) argues that strategic responses should be a priority for cities for several reasons. First, as the most visible homeless group, chronically homeless individuals disproportionately impact public perceptions of local homelessness problems. Second, the chronically homeless are particularly vulnerable due to their history, health, and living conditions. They need a significant amount of support and face more barriers to overcoming homelessness because of their disability status. Finally, the costs of responding to chronic homelessness are exceptionally high because the police, along with other criminal justice agencies, are commonly called upon by community stakeholders to manage homelessness-related issues (e.g., see Donley & Wright, 2008; Fang, 2009; Greenberg & Rosenheck, 2008; Kushel et al., 2005; McNiel et al., 2005). The costs of criminal justice responses could be reduced by enhancing the overall response to homelessness and by addressing contributing factors that cause homelessness (see, Batko et al., 2020).

The urgency to adopt evidence-based solutions is great because the demand for solutions is occurring at a time when police resources and staff are declining. Research has indicated an increase in emergency and nonemergency complaints about homelessness received by police departments

(Herring, 2019). This “crisis of complaints” impacts police responses to homelessness in significant ways. Police research has historically discussed high levels of discretion to “handle the problem” of homelessness (Bittner, 1967; Muir, 1977). Recently, handling the problem of homelessness often means “shuffling the burden” to other street-level bureaucracies, such as medical, sanitation, and social welfare agencies (Herring, 2019, p. 20). Thus, law enforcement tends to pass responding to people experiencing homelessness to other agencies, which in turn try to move it to yet another agency or back to law enforcement. This approach is ineffective and can cause significant harm (Beckett & Herbert, 2009; Herring, 2019).

Responding to Chronic Homelessness

To successfully address chronic homelessness, your agency should develop an understanding of the specific problem in your community from multiple perspectives; implement data-driven, evidence-informed strategies; maintain robust data systems; and leverage technology to enhance solutions. This section discusses engaging the right partners, implementing strategies, and using data to guide responses.

Identifying Local Partners

An effective response to chronic homelessness requires addressing a variety of issues, including poverty, inequality, affordable housing, economic instability, mental health concerns, and substance abuse. Since these issues cannot be solved by law enforcement alone, an effective response requires the involvement of partners who can provide complementary services, resources, perspectives, and expertise.

Government, private, nonprofit, and advocacy agencies should all be involved in responding to chronic homelessness. Government agencies include other law enforcement and criminal justice agencies, in addition to the police, housing and community/urban development departments, social services, city/county housing authorities, public health departments, emergency management agencies, and schools. Private and nonprofit organizations include counseling, treatment, and rehabilitation services; faith-based organizations; legal aid organizations; and organizations that support shelters, food banks, job training, housing placement, and rental assistance. Collaborating with individuals who are

experiencing chronic homelessness is also integral for gathering perspectives to inform responses.

Below is a brief list of groups and organizations that can offer support in understanding the problem, developing responses, and providing services that might increase the impact of those responses. You should identify the liaisons of these partner organizations as soon as possible.

- + **Community outreach, faith-based, and other organizations serving homeless individuals.** Typically, several community organizations provide various services, resources, and support to homeless people in every jurisdiction. These organizations often focus on meeting immediate needs (e.g., food, temporary shelter) but can also serve as an important bridge between law enforcement and the homeless population.
- + **Criminal justice agencies.** Due to criminalizing ordinances and policies surrounding homelessness, it is not unusual for people experiencing homelessness to have extensive experience with the criminal justice system. Criminal justice organizations can assist with postrelease needs (e.g., probation) and case management, and community court options can connect people to services rather than incarcerate them. There may be “navigators” who can assist.
- + **Continuums of care, administrative bodies, and interagency partnerships.** Communities have generally accepted the importance of collaboration across agencies. These collectives work on different issues impacting homeless individuals, and law enforcement have an important role to play in many of these responses. Some coordinating bodies

also raise and secure funding for other services and organizations that assist people experiencing homelessness.

- + **Local government agencies.** There are many local government agencies that can help you better understand your local issue and develop a response. These agencies can include your state attorney's office, public works department, housing authority, code enforcement, the fire department, and emergency medical services, among others.
- + **Healthcare professionals.** Homeless people can be high utilizers of emergency departments and public health organizations. Frequent interactions with these individuals by officers or other partners provide opportunities for education about and connections to existing services, shelters, and transition housing. Healthcare professionals may offer opportunities for co-responses between the officers and partners. There may also be mobile health teams in your jurisdiction.
- + **Mental health and substance use service providers.** It is common for chronically homeless individuals to experience both mental health conditions and substance use disorders. Mental health and substance use providers can support responses by explaining the services available in a community, including how and when they can be accessed. These service providers can work alongside officers as co-responders to people experiencing homelessness.
- + **Street outreach programs.** The chronically homeless are encountered most in public spaces. It is important to meet homeless clients where they live, making street outreach an essential component of any response. Partners who engage in street outreach tend to be very knowledgeable about the who, what, where, and why of the local chronically homeless population.

- + **Transportation companies.** Transportation can be a barrier for the chronically homeless. It is important to know what resources are available to them, including public transit like buses, subways, trains, and light rail as well as private companies like Uber and Lyft.
- + **Businesses, business leaders, and economic development collectives.** Community service providers connected to businesses and the economic health of a community can provide information on how homelessness impacts the business community. These service providers are also in a unique position not only to provide resources to assist homeless people but also to respond to and challenge policymakers to develop evidence-based policies.
- + **Researchers/academics.** Researchers and academics can provide analytical support to better understand the problem, summarize studies highlighting promising practices, guide implementation, and evaluate implemented strategies. It is important to consider your local context, and researchers can provide a different skillset to help you answer local questions (see, for example, Hipple et al., 2016; Rojek et al., 2015; Saunders et al., 2020).
- + **General media and social media.** The often-negative portrayal of homelessness across media platforms influences how policymakers, business leaders, and the public respond to homelessness. This influence makes media messaging a strategic lever for shifting how homelessness is understood and addressed. Law enforcement agencies can use existing agency social media accounts to highlight the factors contributing to chronic homelessness, evidence-based solutions, and problems with relying only on law enforcement responses. Through such communication, law enforcement can educate these stakeholders and directly pressure them to focus on adopting promising strategies.

- + **Victim services organizations.** Homeless individuals are frequently victimized by crime but may be afraid to report their experiences or lack easy access to these services. Victim services organizations can help victims cope with their physical and psychological injuries, aid them in engaging the legal system, and assist in their reintegration into the community.
- + **Other interested parties.** There are often nonaffiliated/interested/well-intended members of the public who have relationships with homeless individuals and may make good partners. Similarly, formerly homeless people or those with lived experience may be involved with the local homeless population. These relationships can be fruitful but should be approached with caution. It is important to be aware of a partner's or agency's history and longevity.

Asking the Right Questions

The following is a list of questions you should ask about homelessness in your community when developing and implementing a response. These questions relate to community characteristics, the characteristics of the local homeless population, interactions between chronically homeless individuals and the community, homeless individuals as offenders and victims, the location and timing of incidents, and current responses. The answers to these questions can help clarify the problem's scope and identify appropriate responses. Importantly, law enforcement responses need to be tailored to your local context. You must spend time finding the answers to these questions. Your crime analyst or local research partner can be particularly helpful for this task.

Local Community Characteristics

- + In what geographic areas are the chronically homeless most visible?
 - ▶ What are the physical characteristics of these areas?
 - ▶ What makes these areas attractive to the chronically homeless?
- + Where do the chronically homeless congregate?
 - ▶ Does this location change based on the time of day, day of the week, or time of the year?
 - ▶ Why do they congregate there? What makes the area attractive?
- + Are there any designated distribution sites for food or resources in your community?
- + What are the demographic characteristics (e.g., age, race, ethnicity) of the chronically homeless in your area?
 - ▶ What portion of the chronically homeless are individuals? Couples? Families? Individuals/families with pets?
 - ▶ Are the chronically homeless local to your area, or are they coming in from other cities?
 - ▶ Are certain health issues more common than others among the chronically homeless population?
- + What large events occur regularly that might affect the chronically homeless (e.g., sporting events, concerts, conventions) in your jurisdiction?
- + What are the quality-of-life laws in your jurisdiction?
- + Are there local ordinances that would be considered "anti-homeless" or as criminalizing homelessness?

Local Partners

- + What agencies or organizations can support homelessness response in your area?

- ▶ Who are the key contacts at each agency?
 - ◆ Are there case managers or liaisons available to assist the your department (either individuals already in these organizations or individuals who could be embedded)?
- ▶ Are there resources, organizations, or services that could be involved in formulating a response that are currently not involved?
- ▶ What tensions, if any, exist between these agencies/organizations and your agency?
- + What mental health, substance use, and health resources and services are available in your area for people experiencing chronic homelessness?
 - ▶ What are the steps for homeless individuals to access these resources and services?
 - ▶ How easy is it to take the steps to access them?
 - ▶ Who are the key contacts in each agency?
- + What emergency, temporary, and permanent housing options are available?
 - ▶ What are the steps for homeless individuals to access these housing options?
 - ▶ Do officers understand how to connect homeless individuals with the available housing options?
 - ▶ Who are the contacts at these organizations?

Experiences of Homeless Individuals in Your Community

- + What do people experiencing chronic homelessness report as the primary causes of their homelessness?

- ▶ Do these reported causes align with the identified contributors to homelessness in your area?
- + How do the chronically homeless feel about their interactions with your agency?
- + How do the chronically homeless feel about their interactions with other service providers?
- + What are the barriers to seeking or engaging in services?
- + What do the chronically homeless report as their biggest needs or concerns?
 - ▶ Why are these concerns particularly important?
- + What are the most significant challenges faced by the chronically homeless on a day-to-day basis?
- + How do people experiencing homelessness access housing and services independently from your agency?

Current Law Enforcement Responses

- + What partnerships or collaborative bodies exist to respond to homelessness?
 - ▶ What are the foci of these partnerships/ collaborative bodies?
- + Does your agency have a crime analyst who can help with data collection and analysis specific to this issue?
- + What policies or general orders exist within your department that speak to responding to homelessness?
- + Are there local laws/ordinances that are specific to the homeless problem?
 - ▶ Are there any specific to certain behaviors?
 - ▶ Are there any specific to certain spaces?
- + Who is the legal counsel for your agency?
- + What is your agency's relationship with the American Civil Liberties Union (i.e., the ACLU)?
 - ▶ Are there other similar legal agencies specific to your local context?

- + Is your jurisdiction the subject of any homelessness-related lawsuits?
- + Is there training (i.e., in-services, roll call/ shift briefings) available to inform all officers about homelessness-related resources and partners?
- + What community programs are available to educate the public about homelessness?
- + Does your agency's response change seasonally or depend on the time of the year?
- + What emergency facilities are available to house people experiencing homelessness?
- + How are people experiencing homelessness part of emergency disaster planning?
- + Do any programs exist that work to improve relationships between people experiencing homelessness and your agency?

Interactions

- + When and where does the public interact with people experiencing homelessness?
- + How do community pressures impact the perceived urgency to respond to homelessness?
- + How do public perceptions influence the demands made for a law enforcement response?
- + What factors influence how the business community and other stakeholders perceive homelessness in your jurisdiction?
- + Does the media cover this issue? In what ways?
 - ▶ What is the relationship between the media and your agency on this issue?
- + Are there independent individuals (do-gooders) in your community who are attempting to deliver services to the chronically homeless?
- + Does your agency try to educate the public on this issue? If so, how (e.g., traditional media, social media, public service announcements, resource guides)?

Homeless Individuals as Victims

- + How often are homeless people the victims of crimes?
- + What types of crimes are they victims of?
- + In crimes involving a weapon, what types of weapons are used?
- + What are the characteristics of individuals experiencing repeat victimization?
- + What is the relationship between the victim and the offender for each crime?
 - ▶ Is the offender a homeless individual?
- + How many homeless victims do not report their victimization to law enforcement? Why don't they report? What demographic groups are least likely to report? Why?
- + What barriers exist to assisting with the investigation and prosecution of these crimes?
- + What barriers exist to communicating with and working with victim service organizations?
- + Where do crimes against homeless individuals occur? Do they occur near shelters? Near encampments? Near business districts? Near locations where alcohol is sold or served?
 - ▶ Are there hotspot victimization locations?
- + What day of the week and time of the day have the highest victimization rates?
- + Are there other circumstances that contribute to the victimization of the homeless?
- + How often are homeless individuals the victims of hate crimes?

Homeless Individuals as Offenders

- + What types of crimes do homeless people commit?
 - ▶ How many are violent crimes?
 - ▶ How many are property crimes?
 - ▶ How often are citations or arrests made for quality-of-life laws?
 - ▶ How many involve weapons?

- ▶ What are the motivations behind these offenses?
- + What is the relationship between the offender and the victim for each crime?
 - ▶ Is the victim a homeless individual?
- + How often is mental illness or substance use a contributing factor to offenses?
- + Do offenders have frequent contact with your agency and the criminal justice system?
 - ▶ What is their offending history?
 - ▶ Are they repeating a specific offense, or do they engage in a variety of offending behaviors?
 - ▶ How often do homeless individuals have open warrants?
- + How do the rates and types of crimes involving people experiencing homelessness compare to the rest of the offending population?
- + How have crime incidents involving people experiencing homelessness as victims or offenders changed over time?

Accessing Data on Chronic Homelessness

Data are used to understand the scope of a problem, improve resource utilization, identify gaps in service delivery, prioritize areas or populations, highlight opportunities for change, and assess the impact of interventions. However, using data to guide problem-solving efforts can be challenging. Data may not be available or in a readily accessible format. There may be legal, privacy, or bureaucratic restrictions on sharing data between stakeholders. Further, data might not be processed and ready for distribution quickly. Overall, there is considerable variation

across communities regarding the amount, types, and quality of data available (Goodison et al., 2020).

Still, several locally available data sources can help you understand the homelessness problem in your community. First, there are local-level data from **HUD's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS)**. HMIS stores eligibility and client information about people who access homeless services. HUD collects these data to provide the following:

- 1) unduplicated counts of clients served locally,
- 2) analysis of trends and patterns of service use, and
- 3) evaluations of the effectiveness of homelessness response systems included in the Continuum of Care (CoC)³ Program (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2009).

The data in HMIS are collected and managed by the CoC Program through Point-in-Time Counts, Homeless Inventory Counts, and individual use of homeless-related services. Point-in-Time Counts measure the number of individuals and families experiencing homelessness on one single night in communities at least once every 2 years. These counts usually occur in late January and include information on the number of both sheltered and unsheltered people. Housing Inventory Counts represent the number of beds or units available in communities specifically for homeless individuals. These data are used to produce HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report and are used locally for case management, policy evaluation, and service provider assistance.

Second, a local data source available in many communities is the **nonemergency reporting system data** (i.e., 311 system). These systems serve as a

³ See <https://www.hud.gov/hud-partners/community-coc> for more information about the CoC Program.

central hub for community members to report nonemergency concerns like noise complaints, potholes, graffiti, and abandoned vehicles and buildings as well as concerns about homeless encampments and homeless individuals. Submission methods range from traditional call-in/message systems to mobile apps and online portals. These data, while not specific to homelessness, can provide contextual information on concerns raised by community members and potentially troublesome geographic areas. These data can be problematic because they are generated by community members and are not uniformly formatted. In addition, they can be difficult to “mine” due to their textual nature; a research partner or crime analyst may be able to help analyze them (see White & Trump, 2018).

There are also [external local data sources](#) that may be used. For example, partner agencies might have data about people, contacts, and services they are willing to share. Shelters might also share data on available beds and service users.

Another data source is [Built for Zero](#) (BFZ), an initiative for data-driven strategy geared toward ending homelessness in the United States (Community Solutions, 2024; Grainger, 2024). More than 150 communities are taking part and guiding the distribution of services for people experiencing homelessness. BFZ supports “by-name data” or a “by-name list” of every person in a community who is experiencing homelessness. By-name data are updated in real time to better understand the history, health needs, and housing needs of every homeless individual in a community (Community Solutions, 2024). Thus, these data provide information on the longitudinal trends of the individuals who are most in need of services. These data are also used to evaluate the impact of collaborative strategies and solutions directed at helping specific individuals. Service providers claim that these data enhance a community’s ability

to respond to homelessness by better linking service needs to specific individuals and adjusting strategies based on impact (Grainger, 2024).

Importantly, [internal law enforcement data sources](#) can be used to enhance problem-solving efforts. Your agency might capture data specific to the chronically homeless in its computer aided dispatch (CAD) system or records management systems (RMS). Unfortunately, crime data specific to people experiencing homelessness can be difficult to obtain. If available, the reliability and validity of these data should be examined. It is no surprise that many law enforcement CAD systems and RMSs are not equipped to provide specific data related to people experiencing homelessness. The first step is to determine what, if any, data are available from your data systems. Here again, you might need help from an analyst or research partner to make the best use of these data. Data analysis of officer interactions with homeless people and surveys or interviews can be used to analyze the problem and assess the impact of possible solutions. If limited data are available, it could be that a system to capture interactions with the chronically homeless is in place but is underutilized. If underutilization is the case, training updates or something similar may be required to remind officers about the system and why it is important. Next, you could consider the need for a deep dive into such data to address the questions posed in the “Asking the Right Questions” section before developing a response.

Beyond general internal law enforcement data sources, it is not unusual for [homelessness specialty units](#) to be intimately familiar with their the chronically homeless population in their communities. They often know the names and other identifying information of the individuals with whom they regularly interact. This knowledge base can help identify which chronically homeless individuals are high utilizers of the criminal justice

system and inform response efforts (Hipple, 2017). Reducing formal system contact for these individuals can be one way of measuring change over time. Additionally, [interviews with homeless individuals](#) are particularly important for understanding service gaps or problems associated with obtaining services. Other examples of tailoring data and technological use to local circumstances include asking people experiencing homelessness to complete a survey on a mobile device to better understand their needs, using mobile apps to track officer interactions with people experiencing homelessness, deploying drones to locate homeless individuals, and using geographic information systems to identify encampment locations (Police Executive Research Forum, 2018).

Developing Chronic Homelessness Response Strategies

Your analysis of local chronic homelessness should give you a better understanding of the factors contributing to it and the responses most likely to have an impact. When you have completed this analysis, you can develop your response strategies. The strategies presented below offer methods to address chronic homelessness. These strategies are drawn from a variety of research studies and incident reports and can be tailored to respond to your local problem based on your analysis.

In most cases, an effective strategy will involve implementing several different responses simultaneously. Do not limit your response strategies to what local law enforcement can do. Instead, consider whether other community stakeholders can and should share

the responsibility for responding to chronic homelessness and can collaborate with law enforcement in addressing the issues associated with it. In some cases, the responsibility for responding may need to be shifted to those with the greatest capacity to implement effective responses.

Establish a Collaborative Interagency Approach to Addressing Homelessness

Law enforcement agencies should develop a strategy that leverages interagency collaboration and enables officers to make appropriate referrals to partnering agencies.

Services for homeless individuals are often provided independently and without coordination among service providers, sometimes owing to legal, ethical, and technological challenges. An interagency collaborative approach to addressing homelessness can address these silos and support comprehensive responses, providing individuals experiencing chronic homelessness the services they need from the organizations best situated to offer them. As such, partnerships should form the foundation of law enforcement responses to chronic homelessness.

Any response to the homeless population requires information about available resources, working day-to-day partnerships, and multiagency response coordination (Batko et al., 2020; Goodison et al., 2020; Hipple et al., 2025; Police Executive Research Forum, 2018). Homeless individuals are understandably hesitant to trust law enforcement officers or other agencies because street-level bureaucracies are fundamentally limited in their ability to tailor resources to clients' needs (Lipsky, 1980). Law enforcement officers are in a position to foster trust depending on how they manage

interactions with the chronically homeless. By working with other agencies and understanding the needs of homeless people from their perspective, law enforcement agencies can more clearly define the scope of their mission relative to other organizations' and agencies' services.

Law enforcement agencies know their communities and have access to data systems that can assist in understanding the specific people and places impacted by homelessness. Thus, coupling law enforcement organizations with other criminal justice, community, and government agencies provides opportunities for a more impactful response. Law enforcement and other agencies and groups can form task forces, working groups, coordinating bodies, or multidisciplinary partnerships. There has been extraordinary growth in using such partnership models to respond to many difficult criminal justice problems, including gun, school, domestic, and youth violence. These partnerships have led to understanding how services are delivered, where they overlap, and how they can be provided more effectively. Similar to these issues, homelessness is a complex problem that requires a collaborative multiagency response.

Law enforcement can be involved in working groups in several different ways. Some communities may have a community-wide partnership group with representatives from different stakeholder agencies. These groups are important because they are focused on identifying gaps in service delivery, writing policy, and coordinating efforts. Law enforcement may also initiate specific responses to homelessness that include partnerships with particular organizations. For example, the Seattle Navigation Team is a partnership between the Seattle Police Department, caseworkers, and the city's facilities department.

HUD's CoC Program is responsible for providing funding and support to end homelessness and for coordinating services at the local level. The goal of the model is collaboration at the local level across all aspects of responding to homelessness: outreach, intake, emergency and temporary housing, and transitional and permanent housing. The CoC Program monitors responses to reducing homelessness and collects data to better understand the scope of the problem. Studies on the functioning of local or regional CoC Programs conclude that these programs increase access to services, improve service coordination for recipients, and improve overall responses to homelessness (Burt et al., 2016).

Understand the Legal Landscape For Addressing Homelessness in Your Jurisdiction

Undoubtedly, homelessness and the role law enforcement plays in responding to it are complicated matters. There is considerable uncertainty among local governments regarding the oversight standards for law enforcement interactions with individuals experiencing homelessness. An analysis of a series of high-profile court decisions revealed how the application of these standards continually evolves and often varies across the United States. Local governments need to take note of how this type

of oversight plays out, especially in relation to constitutional standards for law enforcement, which, in this instance, culminated in the U.S. Supreme Court weighing in on the critical issues discussed next.⁴ This section provides a brief overview of the legal landscape surrounding policing and homelessness as of the writing of this guide. We encourage you to consult your agency's legal team for specific legal guidance.

The foundational case related to policing and homelessness was *Pottinger v. City of Miami* (*Pottinger*). The case was settled with the two key provisions that paved the way for future cases. To simplify, the first provision defined “life-sustaining conduct” misdemeanors as behaviors like eating, sleeping, sitting, congregating, or walking in public—behaviors that homeless individuals must do in public by nature of their status as homeless. The second provision spoke to when officers can arrest for these life-sustaining conduct misdemeanors, which is *only if there is an “available shelter” and the homeless person refuses to accept the shelter.*⁵

The Department of Justice (DOJ) carried these provisions to other proceedings, which subsequently became *Martin v. City of Boise* (*Martin*).⁶ The DOJ, citing *Pottinger*, reasoned the following:

Once an individual becomes homeless, by virtue of this status certain life necessities (such as

sleeping) that would otherwise be performed in private must now be performed in public. Therefore, sleeping in public is precisely the type of **“universal and unavoidable” conduct that is necessary for human survival for homeless individuals** who lack access to shelter space.⁷ (emphasis added)

The DOJ argued that in these types of cases, a homeless individual has nowhere else to go and that arresting a homeless individual for a life-sustaining conduct misdemeanor *criminalizes* them for being homeless.⁸ Further, adopting the reasoning of *Jones v. City of Los Angeles*, the DOJ stated that “it should be uncontroversial that punishing conduct that is a ‘universal and unavoidable consequence of being human’ violates the Eighth Amendment” to the U.S. Constitution by effectively criminalizing a person’s *status* as a homeless individual.⁹ As writers of the *Harvard Law Review* noted, the ultimate federal court ruling in *Martin* held that municipal ordinances criminalizing sleeping, sitting, or lying in all public spaces violate the Eighth Amendment against cruel and unusual punishment *only when no shelter beds are available*. Relatedly, cities needed to create a system to track available shelter beds to guide enforcement (Harvard Law Review, 2019).

In June 2024, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the *Martin* ruling and its rationale, resolving a key issue at the intersection of homelessness and

4 City of Grants Pass v. Johnson, 603 U.S. 520 (2024). https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/23pdf/23-175_19m2.pdf

5 *Pottinger v. City of Miami*, 810 F. Supp. 1551 (S.D. Fla. 1992).

6 *Bell v. City of Boise*, No. 1:09-cv-540 (D. Idaho Aug. 6, 2015), *Bell v. City of Boise*, 709 F.3d 890, 894 (9th Cir. 2013). Subsequently, *Martin v. City of Boise*, 920 F.3d 584 (9th Cir. 2019).

7 Statement of Interest of the United States at 6–9, *Bell v. City of Boise*, No. 1:09-cv-540 (D. Idaho Aug. 6, 2015), citing *Pottinger*, 810 F. Supp at 1564.

8 *Id.* at 12.

9 *Id.* at 11, citing *Jones v. City of Los Angeles*, 444 F.3d 1118, at 1137 (9th Cir. 2006), vacated after settlement, 505 F.3d 1006 (9th Cir. 2007).

law enforcement in its landmark decision in *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson (Grants Pass)*.¹⁰ Grants Pass, Oregon, had ordinances banning camping on public property (sidewalks, parks, etc.) with escalating penalties: first fines and then short jail terms for repeat violators (see Howe, 2024).¹¹ Homeless residents challenged these rules under the Eighth Amendment’s ban on “cruel and unusual punishment,” echoing the Ninth Circuit’s *Martin* decision—the ordinances should not be enforced if there are no available shelter beds.

The Supreme Court, however, reversed the Ninth Circuit decision, holding that the ordinances at issue are constitutional because they proscribe *conduct* rather than *status* and that the punishments are neither cruel nor unusual.¹² The Supreme Court emphasized that Grants Pass’s ordinances “simply bar camping on public property by everyone” and do not target homelessness as a status.¹³ Further, the Supreme Court held that “low-level fines and jail terms” for public camping are *not* “cruel and unusual punishments” even when applied to involuntarily homeless individuals.¹⁴ Quoting *Powell v. Texas* (1968), the Supreme Court reiterated that the Eighth Amendment “focuses on the question what ‘method or kind of punishment’ a government may impose after a criminal conviction, not on the question whether a government may criminalize particular behavior in the first place.”¹⁵ The Eighth Amendment was not violated because Grants

Pass’s laws impose common penalties, fines, and short jail terms for repeated trespass.¹⁶

The *Grants Pass* decision means that as a matter of federal constitutional law, cities and counties are no longer prevented by *Martin* from enforcing general public-camping bans (with fines or short jail terms). Indeed, the majority framed homelessness as a policy challenge best handled by legislatures and communities, not federal courts:

Homelessness is complex. Its causes are many. So may be the public policy responses required to address it. The question this case presents is whether the Eighth Amendment grants federal judges primary responsibility for assessing those causes and devising those responses. A handful of federal judges cannot begin to “match” the collective wisdom the American people possess in deciding “how best to handle” a pressing social question like homelessness. (Robinson, 370 U. S., at 689 (White, J., dissenting). **The Constitution’s Eighth Amendment serves many important functions, but it does not authorize federal judges to wrest those rights and responsibilities from the American**

10 *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson*. See <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/LSB11203>, https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/23pdf/23-175_19m2.pdf.

11 See <https://scotusblog.com/2024/06/justices-uphold-laws-targeting-homelessness-with-criminal-penalties/#:~:text=Violators%20face%20steep%20fines%3A%20%24295%2C,jail%20and%20a%20%241%2C250%20fine.>

12 See <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/LSB11203>.

13 See <https://www.scotusblog.com/2024/06/justices-uphold-laws-targeting-homelessness-with-criminal-penalties/#:~:text=The%20Supreme%20Court%20on%20Friday,on%20cruel%20and%20unusual%20punishment.>

14 See <https://constitutioncenter.org/blog/supreme-court-upholds-ordinances-regulating-public-homeless-encampments#:~:text=ImageIn%20a%206,to%20camping%20on%20public%20property.>

15 *Id.*

16 *Id.*

people and in their place dictate this Nation's homelessness policy.¹⁷ (pp. 34–35, emphasis added)

The *Grants Pass* ruling struck a powerful blow to proponents of the *Martin* rationale advocating for more limits on local governments. However, governments should be mindful of how the Supreme Court was careful to *limit its holding to the Eighth Amendment context*. The *Grants Pass* decision even referenced that *other legal protections remain in place*.¹⁸ This reference is very important to note, and homelessness advocates and oversight organizations have emphasized it, pointing out that Fourth Amendment challenges to unlawful searches and seizures, 14th Amendment equal-protection claims, and federal civil rights and disability laws still regulate and constrain enforcement.¹⁹

Federal authority and oversight can be very nuanced and fluid. Federal court rulings often require considerable analysis, particularly regarding the law enforcement protocols that must be in place to ensure responsible government action and avoid igniting another series of cases like *Pottinger*. Federal executive and judicial oversight will continue, and local governments must vigilantly monitor the evolving guidance and action of federal agencies and courts.

Decide Whether to Establish a Special Unit to Address Homelessness

Law enforcement agencies that routinely respond

to people experiencing homelessness often have a specialized unit devoted to this purpose. Many agencies now consider outreach to homeless people critical to the overall law enforcement mission (Goodison et al., 2020). So-called homeless outreach teams or HOT units are common in larger cities. Even in smaller departments that cannot staff an entire unit, it might help to designate one or more officers who specialize in responding to issues related to people experiencing homelessness.²⁰

The work that occurs in a HOT unit often falls outside what the public views as routine police work, such as patrolling, enforcing traffic laws, and responding to crimes and emergency situations. For this reason, HOT units should attract a different kind of officer—one who has a unique blend of policing skills, empathy, and the ability to partner with non-law-enforcement agencies. That is, a HOT unit may not be the best assignment for a new officer who has not yet developed a nuanced approach to discretion while on the job. Rather, these units often attract officers with many more years of experience and more specialized training, such as responding to people experiencing mental health crises and de-escalation. Importantly, units should be composed of officers with a variety of strengths, though this balance may take time to achieve.

HOT unit officers must have *strong communication skills*, including the ability to actively listen and engage in conversations with people who are suffering from mental illness and addiction. HOT unit officers must be *patient and persistent* because it can take considerable time and effort to build

¹⁷ *Id.*, at 5.

¹⁸ See <https://endhomelessness.org/blog/the-supreme-court-rules-on-homelessness-what-it-all-means/>.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ According to the 2020 Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics (LEMAS), roughly 28% of responding police departments with 100 or more officers indicated they had a specialized unit to address homelessness. However, only 8% of all respondents had a specialized unit, and 13% percent said a specific person was designated to address the problem.

trust with individuals experiencing homelessness, especially those who might have had negative experiences with officers. *Compassion and empathy* are important HOT unit officer characteristics—really the most basic traits—as well. Homelessness is often caused by complex factors, and HOT unit officers must be able to treat people experiencing homelessness with dignity and respect. These officers need to have experienced a larger volume of encounters with individuals living with mental illness and addiction throughout their careers and to have developed cultural competency and sensitivity as they relate to homelessness.

HOT unit officers need to be *team players* who are willing and able to *partner with agencies* outside their department, including social service agencies, not-for-profit agencies, and healthcare organizations. These relationships can be tricky as they also require a certain level of trust. Additionally, they must be knowledgeable about the social services and resources available to the homeless population. If these relationships do not exist, HOT unit officers need to be willing to build them. HOT unit officers also need to be *flexible and good problem solvers*. Depending on the desired outcome, HOT unit officers often need to be creative in finding solutions that balance public safety with the needs of both homeless people and the homeless population as a whole. Each response should be adjusted based on the particular situation rather than relying upon a one-size-fits-all method. For these reasons, HOT unit officers should be *self-starters* who are willing to be routinely *proactive* and *self-sufficient*. Other characteristics suggested by current HOT unit officers include a sense of humor and thick skin.

A major advantage of establishing a special unit to address homelessness is that it enables officers assigned to the unit to get to know homeless individuals and establish trusting relationships with them. This foundation prepares officers

to identify specific needs and build the rapport needed to address them. It is particularly important for officers to learn individuals' names, backgrounds, and specific life circumstances. Doing so can increase the flow of information from homeless communities to law enforcement about crime and other problems that are causing harm either within the homeless community or in the wider community.

A few notes of caution: First, the HOT unit officer description provided here does not imply that officers outside of these units do not possess these skills; rather, these skills should be at the forefront and fine-tuned for HOT unit officers. Some officers consider this position a niche position. Second, a HOT unit is not a place for senior officers to ride out their time until they retire. HOT units demand a certain kind of officer. Third, specialty unit composition may be dictated by union rules at some law enforcement agencies, which is beyond the scope of this guide.

Train Officers How to Properly Address Homelessness-Related Incidents

The local context and conditions impacting homelessness in a community can vary significantly. The size and type of the community (e.g., urban vs. rural), economic opportunities, crime characteristics, demographics, and climate are among the factors that impact the scope of the homelessness problem and the possible response strategies in a community. Other variations in service delivery might be caused by state and local laws, available criminal justice resources, the number and types of community and social service support organizations, and community culture. These variations require law enforcement agencies to tailor responses to local conditions and to experiment with what may or may not

work. Therefore, training about responding to homelessness should be tailored to the local context and be required for all HOT unit officers and perhaps for the broader force.

Specific Law Enforcement Responses to Homelessness

This section highlights some of the practices and strategies law enforcement agencies use to respond to people experiencing homelessness. It is primarily based on a national study that used open-source data-collection strategies and case studies to develop a menu of law enforcement responses to homelessness (Hipple et al., 2025). It is important to note that as of the writing of this guide, no evaluation data currently speak to “what works.” Some responses may be applicable to your local context and others may not. It is important for law enforcement agencies to thoughtfully establish goals for their jurisdictions and consider the potential pros and cons of each response.

Your analysis of your local problem should give you a better understanding of the factors contributing to it. Once you have analyzed your local problem and established a baseline for measuring effectiveness, you should consider possible responses to address the problem. These responses should be guided by a modified progressive engagement model (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2021) that includes educating and encouraging, referring to services, and enforcement (when needed). You should also consider what, if any, secondary gains your response might create. In most cases, an effective strategy will involve implementing several different responses and repeated outreach. It could also be that no response to a particular situation is a reasonable response. Law enforcement responses

alone are seldom effective in reducing or solving the problem.

Importantly, relationships are the basis for discretionary responses to homelessness. These connections enable officers to identify specific needs and build the rapport needed to address them. It is particularly important for officers to learn individuals’ names, background stories, and specific situations, which can provide opportunities to assess change.

Educating, Encouraging, and Assisting with Access

A major component of law enforcement responses to homelessness involves outreach where officers educate and encourage homeless individuals about physical, mental, and behavioral health services. Some agencies encourage their officers to make contact with homeless individuals to understand their needs and identify outreach opportunities, while other jurisdictions may have a stationary or mobile location in their communities where people experiencing homelessness can easily go to seek outreach assistance.

Officers can also assist with access when homeless individuals are ready and willing to engage with services. Officers might do an independent assessment or partner with a social service agency to understand a person’s needs and direct them to those services. Officers can initiate a “warm handoff” of an individual to a social service agency, a treatment center, or emergency housing. This approach can often be used to avoid more formal law enforcement action and instead facilitate access to community or treatment resources. Other examples might be assisting with identification documentation, checking service availability, providing bus passes, or connecting individuals with agencies that provide

transportation services. Important partners are social workers, emergency medical services, and healthcare providers for on-street medical assessment and care.

Protecting Homeless Individuals from Harm

Protecting homeless individuals from harm might involve helping them obtain shelter in advance of severe weather events, such as extreme heat or cold or severe storms. It might involve keeping homeless individuals informed about large crowds arriving for a sporting event or concert and letting them know where they can go to avoid the stressors of those crowds. It could also involve de-escalating situations that arise at an encampment or other location where homeless people congregate before engaging in more formal law enforcement action. For example, officers may receive a complaint about illegal activity occurring at an encampment. Officers may first respond by speaking with individuals at the encampment and attempting to change their behavior to address the complaint.

Providing for Homeless Individuals' Essential Needs

It is not uncommon for social service agencies to operate during the traditional work week, with reduced access overnight and on weekends. As a result, officers might need to supply items that meet a homeless individual's immediate essential needs, such as clothing, blankets, period products, food, or water. Some of these items might be stored in a patrol car or police station. Similarly, this kind of support might be extended to the companion animals of homeless people, including providing food, water, and bedding or helping obtain veterinary care.

While it is preferable that law enforcement agencies, local governments, or private social service agencies fund these essential needs, there are abundant examples of individual officers buying food for a homeless person with their own money, taking a homeless person shopping for clothes and other essential items, or paying for a hotel room under certain circumstances.

Enforcing Laws Regulating Homelessness

There are times when the law enforcement response to homelessness must entail formal law enforcement action and involve other parts of the criminal justice system. Modified progressive enforcement is based on outreach, but it does not preclude arrest and detention when necessary. Officers respond to a range of complaints involving homeless people. For some of these complaints, the behavior is explicitly connected to homelessness (e.g., bathing in public, panhandling), while for others, homelessness is not part of the root issue (e.g., assaults, harassment).

Measuring Your Effectiveness

There are no national standards to guide law enforcement responses to homelessness, nor are there clear insights into “what works” for addressing chronic homelessness. It is important that law enforcement agencies document their response efforts and collect data that can be used to measure impact. Collecting this information can help develop an understanding of response effects and needed adjustments to the response strategy as well as offer lessons learned for the field. A research partner can be particularly helpful for thinking through both strategic processes and

outcomes as well as data sources. Data collection can occur in a wide variety of forms. There may be existing data sources that will meet your needs. If there are not, consider collecting your own data to help answer the questions you have and inform your strategy. These more qualitative methods could include surveys, interviews, and contact cards/field interview forms.

Below are potentially useful measures to assess your response to homelessness in your jurisdiction. We begin with suggested process measures that can help you examine the steps you took to implement your response strategy. The outcome measures will help you determine the

+ SEE THIS RESOURCE:

Planning, Implementing, and Assessing Law Enforcement Responses to Homelessness

It was created to support law enforcement agencies seeking to build effective responses to homelessness. This resource includes a report with a checklist and sample materials to help agencies better understand, design, and evaluate their homelessness response efforts in partnership with researchers and community organizations. It also includes a downloadable, customizable logic model that agencies can fill out with their research partners.

results of your actions or response. Both sets of measures should be tailored to your local actions and responses.

Process Measures

- + Number of officers trained in managing mental health and substance use calls for service.
- + Number of officers who understand the impact of homelessness on the community and how your agency responds to it.
- + Number of officers who know about the programs and services available to people experiencing homelessness in the community for referrals.
- + Number of referrals for people experiencing homelessness to noncriminal justice agencies.
- + Communication, interactions, and cooperation between your agency and various stakeholders, including businesses, service providers, and organizations that provide resources.
- + Prevention of the victimization of homeless people.
- + Communication between the homeless population and your agency.
- + Trust between the homeless population and your agency.
- + Number of homeless individuals reporting their victimization to your agency.
- + Understanding and support from members of the public about homelessness in the community.

Outcome Measures

- + Number of homeless-specific complaints.
- + Number of homeless attacks in the community.
- + Number of crimes committed by people experiencing homelessness.
- + Number of aggressive/frequent offenders.

- + Severity of harm caused by the victimization of homeless individuals in the community.
- + Fear of becoming a victim among homeless individuals.
- + Use of services and support organizations by people experiencing homelessness.
- + Number of days stayed in shelters and temporary housing.
- + Disparities in providing services and responding to people experiencing homelessness in the community.
- + Recidivism rates for homeless offenders.
- + Use of diversion, noncriminal justice alternatives, and criminal justice support programs.

Keep in mind that there are some gains, known as secondary gains, that your agency may not be able to track or measure easily. A secondary gain is a smaller or hidden benefit resulting from a law enforcement response. Many chronically homeless individuals are resistant to services and may not want to change their life situations. Permanent housing may be the goal of a jurisdiction or broader coalition, but it is not a goal your agency can realistically take on. Therefore, it is important to think about secondary gains when responding to homelessness. A series of secondary gains might lead a homeless individual to eventually accept temporary housing. For example, if officers can assist an individual with accessing medications or mental health treatment, a secondary gain could be clear or sober thinking. With clear thinking, that individual may realize that temporary housing is a better living situation than living on the street.

Conclusion

Law enforcement responses to homelessness require specific knowledge, judgment, and skills—just like any other specialized area in policing. Your agency plays an important role in a community’s response to chronic homelessness; however, it should not be leading the response. Partnerships are the backbone to developing an effective response, although they also vary by location. Chronic homelessness and the factors that contribute to it do not look the same everywhere. In order to develop your agency’s response to homelessness, you must understand your local context and be informed by the current legal landscape.

Further, how your agency develops its response should be informed not only by your local context but also by your agency’s capacity. Your response could be a single officer, a small team, or a dedicated unit. Regardless, training for everyone is important. There is no evidence base for what works and what does not for law enforcement agencies responding to homelessness. Make data collection and evaluation an important part of your strategy to assess how well your agency’s response is working and to inform the field.

Abbreviation List

- + **ACLU**—American Civil Liberties Union
- + **BFZ**—Built for Zero
- + **CAD**—Computer Aided Dispatch
- + **CoC**—Continuum of Care
- + **DOJ**—Department of Justice
- + **HMIS**—Homeless Management Information System
- + **HOT**—Homeless Outreach Team
- + **HUD**—Housing and Urban Development
- + **LEMAS**—Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics
- + **LGBT**— Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
- + **PERF**—Police Executive Research Forum
- + **POP**—Problem Oriented Policing
- + **RMS**—Records Management System

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