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Police and Effective Responses to Homelessness

Posted by Iain De Jong 10sc on December 13, 2019

I have written about criminalization of homelessness and the likes of Salt Lake City's Operation Rio Grande (<https://www.orgcode.com/opriogrande>) before. The ACLU of Utah has done a fantastic job analyzing Operation Rio Grande crime statistics (worth a read (<https://www.acluutah.org/resources/articles-position-papers/item/1577-rio-grande-endgame>)) and provides a cautionary tale for other communities that may be at their wits end on addressing street involved behavior and think that upping police engagement from an enforcement perspective is the way to get effective results. I also dedicate a chunk of *The Book on Ending Homelessness* (<https://books.friesenpress.com/store/title/119734000104166225>) to why criminalization approaches to homelessness do not and will not work.

So, what is the role of police in order to have an effective response to homelessness?

When it is positive, police can be one of the greatest resources in the work of ending homelessness.

When it is negative, police can be one of the greatest hindrances in the work of ending homelessness.

Analysis conducted by the California Policy Lab at UCLA using over 60,000 VI-SPDAT records from across the country show the unsheltered homeless population has, on average, more than 20 contacts with police in a six-month period. That level of contact should be a call to action to get the work right and positive, resulting in less homelessness because those who are homeless move to housing.

As one police officer who works on homeless outreach remarked to me, "The police are just as guilty as homeless service providers of confusing inputs and activity with outcomes and performance. The police love to quantify activity, usually as a measure of performance. As you can probably guess, it doesn't work very well. If I'm a police officer making loads of contacts (but not actually solving anything), then I'm a superstar. However, if I spend all day working with one client, resolving their challenges, then it is easy to view me as less-than-effective. The police are not good at measuring something they don't traditionally understand, such as homelessness. A case in point: I spent 4-1/2 years on one client. This is contrary to the usual police response model of rolling into a scene, with lights and sirens blaring, resolving a hostage crisis and delivering a baby, all before lunch. Officers in many busy agencies, such as mine, may handle 20-30 calls for service in a shift. The mindset is that calls for service are holding, and we need to clear this call to get to the next one. You cannot get into problem-solving mode if you are always in crisis-response mode. Also slowing down to the molasses-like pace of homeless bureaucracy is a giant leap for cops used to quantity."

We need to acknowledge and respect that the police are open 24/7/365, and will respond to crisis, no matter what. The ever-expanding list of demands upon their time has increased from the traditional model of apprehending suspects and maintaining the peace, to fulfilling the role of taking on the societal issues that others will not, which can include homeless outreach worker.

In some communities, police working in homeless outreach have become the only option for helping those that no else will. Their role is often a reflection of a community's (lack of) response to homelessness. In other words, the police fill the service gaps and voids left by others. In these types of communities, it seems to police that every agency wants to pick the low-hanging fruit but no one wants the difficult cases, leaving the police to assist the high-need, high-system utilizers (mostly the chronically homeless) that are not assisted by the more mainstream and popular service providers.

There are common features found amongst those police officers that are doing fantastic work in the pursuit of ending homelessness. Here is what I have found in exchanges and interviews with police that fall into this category:

They don't see homelessness as a nuisance.

They see homelessness as a condition of housing. The problem to be solved, in the view of those that do it well, is not about getting businesses or members of the general public to be placated by moving people along or temporarily relocating people to jail. It is about trying to find a permanent solution to the person's homelessness so that whatever "problem" was complained about by others is solved in the best way possible for the person who is homeless.

Effective police homeless outreach realizes that permanently solving an issue also results in reduced calls for service generated by high system utilizers; that getting people to move along solves nothing other than displacing people (and the "problem") elsewhere.

They believe in Housing First.

Data and analytics changed the way policing occurs. Data and analytics changed the way homeless services occur. When there is an opportunity to provide education on what Housing First is and its practice, those police that believe in evidence-informed practice not only get behind Housing First, they become champions of it. A shock to some communities that have negative experiences with police and homelessness, is to learn that in some communities there are Housing First champions who are police officers.

Noted one of the cops that I engaged for this blog who is a Housing First advocate, "Housing solves homelessness; a concept that seems obvious. However, to the police, this seems counter-intuitive, almost an exercise in rewarding bad behavior. Many cops are conservative; we never had any training in harm reduction or trauma informed care. So, giving a chronically homeless client housing and wrap-around services is a foreign concept."

They get training on homelessness.

Many a police officer has shared with me that they didn't get into policing to have to deal with homelessness. But because they do respond to homelessness issues (a lot in some communities) they start to assume that their experience makes them an expert. The best responses to homelessness by police, especially Homeless Outreach Teams established by a police department, are ones that realize they need training in homelessness if they are going to have a positive impact on homelessness.

They are effective, collaborative communicators.

When police are having a positive impact on homelessness, the officers involved tend to be collaborators with other homeless service providers and the CoC, and effective communicators with people who are experiencing homelessness. They attend meetings not because they have to, but because they see the benefits of being a partner and contributor. Police do not offer housing or homelessness specific services. As such, if they want a solution for someone who is homeless, they need to work with outside agencies. Police who do this work well collaborate with those service providers rather than making unreasonable demands of them.

They change the way the police conduct their business with people who are homeless.

Can the police help someone move from homelessness to housing? The answer is a resounding yes. It takes time like any other support provider, but it is possible, and it is happening in some jurisdictions. One of the common features in many of those places is that the police wear a completely different uniform so they are easily identified as doing something different from enforcement.

They separate engagement and support from enforcement.

Having police involved in the provision of support services does not grant a person who has committed infractions or offenses – homeless or otherwise – immune from enforcement. But having different police involved has been demonstrated to be helpful. You don't want the person that was offering assistance today to be the person who is putting you in cuffs tomorrow, if it can at all be avoided.

As one cop put it, "I haven't written a ticket or made an arrest in almost 8 years (this makes me an ineffective officer if you utilize traditional performance metrics)."

They don't try to lead a response they are not trained to lead.

When policing is effective at serving people who are homeless, the police want to work within the strategy that the community has already developed rather than creating their own or parallel process. The police don't see themselves as above the system of care in these instances, but rather a partner in the system of care.

They respond to encampments differently.

Police that are working hard to have a positive impact on homelessness respond to encampments as part of a coordinated response to resolve without requiring enforcement if at all possible. This is remarkably different from those jurisdictions where enforcement happens without coordination with a service response.

One of the great examples of a police officer in the United States doing positive work to assist those who are homeless is Daniel McDonald in Tampa. His insights and knowledge of the issues of homelessness and panhandling are in such demand that in his time off he runs a consulting business (www.homelesspolice.com (<http://www.homelesspolice.com/>)) dedicated to helping other police and elected officials better respond to matters of homelessness and panhandling other than a law and order approach. If the ideas in this blog captured your attention and may be of use to your local police response to homelessness, he is worth the time and energy to engage.

It is my hope that we can create more partnerships that are effective between police and service providers. We share a common interest in helping people who are homeless in not being homeless.



About Iain De Jong

Leader. Edutainer. Coach. Consultant. Professor. Researcher. Blogger. Do-gooder. Potty mouth. Positive disruptor. Relentless advocate for social justice. Comedian. Dad. Minimalist. Recovering musician. Canadian citizen. International jetsetter. Living life in jeans and a t-shirt. Trying really hard to end homelessness in developed countries around the world, expand harm reduction practices, make housing happen, and reform the justice system. Driven by change, fuelled by passion. Winner of a shit ton of prestigious awards, none of which matter unless change happens in how we think about vulnerability, marginality, and inclusion.

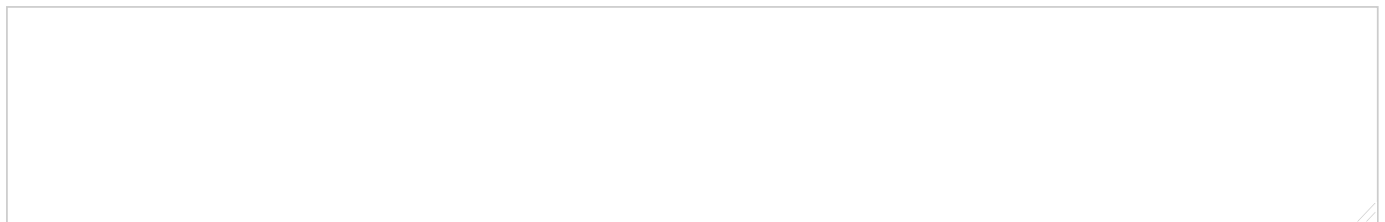
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