

What I Learned From 32 Years of Writing About Homelessness

By [Kevin Fagan](#)

Kevin Fagan is a journalist and the author of [*The Lost and the Found: A True Story of Homelessness, Found Family, and Second Chances*](#).

I was poor during a lot of my childhood, was tossed out of my home at 16 and was so broke in college I sometimes slept in my car. I then bounced around several countries as a writer and street singer sleeping in doorways and fields before finally settling down as a full-time journalist. I say this only to show how, decades ago, when I became a specialist in reporting about [homelessness](#), the street was no stranger to me. In fact, I liked it—and I liked the downtrodden people I met there. They were familiar.

That's why when I stumbled across a woman named Rita Grant in a colony of heroin and crack addicts living on a traffic divider in San Francisco called Homeless Island 22 years ago, it wasn't hard to get to know her. The same was true five years ago when I met a man named Tyson Feilzer, as he sat on a strip of cardboard between hits of methamphetamine and heroin.

It was like I already knew them. We had the same unspoken language of pain, want, frustration—it's a sense that fills in the silent cracks of a conversation with someone who's also had hard times. In this case, as with most chronically homeless folks, their hard times of sleeping on the concrete and dealing with addiction were much [harder than anything I'd suffered](#). They were street-tough, smart, and open with me. I dug them, they dug me, and I wound up writing about them in the San Francisco *Chronicle*, where I was a reporter and editor for 32 years. As time wound on, I became true friends with Rita and Tyson and their families—and now they are the main characters in my book, *The Lost and The Found*.

What I've found in writing about Rita and Tyson's lives—and in reporting intensively on hundreds of other unhoused people struggling in tents, cars, shelters, alleys, and everywhere else you can find refuge—is that their world is a scary mystery to many people. I have loved helping unveil that mystery.

Some people—not many, fortunately—have told me writing about people living in gutters and fields and streets is not worth it. That they are only problems to be shunted aside, hidden, or perhaps gotten housed and saved—but by someone else, out of view. This couldn't be further from the truth. The old maxim of measuring a society by how it treats its most vulnerable people is as true today as ever; by that measure, we fail. And whether or not you are sympathetic to the millions of people experiencing homelessness every year, you need to know who they are.

Rita's and Tyson's journeys took them through unthinkable nightmares most people live very far from. To someone sipping a chardonnay in a white-tablecloth café, a disheveled down-and-outer lying passed out on the sidewalk outside can seem to be just part of the landscape. The decades-old tableau of our modern version of homelessness is too often now something to look away from, or to glance sadly at, or maybe to visit for a moment while you hand over a dollar.

But every one of those people was somebody's baby for at least a brief shining time, a child with potential, or an adult who wanted a life of security and love.

Understanding this has never been more important than it is now.

The federal government last year reported that on any given night, 771,480 people were experiencing homelessness in America—the largest number since the Department of Housing and Urban Development began counting in 2007, and up 18% from the year before. California, where [Gov. Gavin Newsom](#) has steered more than \$20 billion in recent years toward shelter, supportive housing and services, was a rare bright spot with only a 3% rise. But the [recent fires in Los Angeles](#) have only underlined how precarious life can be, how narrow the line between the housed and the homeless.

Bright spots in our nation's ability to address this crisis are few. And it's no mystery why.

We are in a new age of robber barons, and the problem didn't merely explode over the past few years. It's anything but just a local thing—for any city, [San Francisco](#) or otherwise. It's largely the result of that long, slow burn of governmental abandonment and mismanagement of support for poor people, affordable housing, and mental health programs that ignited in the 1980s. That, plus an economic system and society that abide by inadequate low-income wages, lack of national health care, oppressive housing and rent practices, and more. There is, of course, debate over exactly what went so wrong. Many nonprofit and academic studies blame it on the slashing of [crucial federal social-aid and housing programs](#) under Reagan's watch, while others say the bigger problem is that government money meant for the poor gets sucked up in bureaucracy or badly diverted. We also live in a country where greed has too free a hand. But the fact is the societal landscape for those on the bottom decayed, and the subsequent cascade of programmatic failures and conservative attacks on support for the lower and middle classes are a lot of what led us to where we are today.

The Western Regional Advocacy Project, an antipoverty nonprofit led by longtime activist Paul Boden, reported in 2006 that between 1978 and 1983, HUD's annual national budget was slashed from \$83 billion to \$18 billion, calculated in 2004 constant dollars. This shortfall was never made up in HUD's budget—which in 2022 was \$54 billion—or in the Band-Aid programs that grew up around it.

“If you look at the last forty years of addressing homelessness, there have been two constants: using police and private security and public works for addressing it with sweeps—and then blaming people for being homeless—and putting out plans,” said Paul, who was homeless as a very young man just before I got to know him as the scrappy Bay Area protester and homeless-rights advocate he became in the 1980s. “Ten-year plans, supportive housing plans, welfare plans—everybody loves a f-cking plan. But none of it addresses how we as a country are going to get [affordable housing](#) back to where it was before the massive federal cuts of the 1980s and the growth of homelessness that we know today. Housing will fix homelessness, not more plans.”

Read More: [America's Laws Make us Bystanders to the Homeless Crisis](#)

It's also no surprise that racism and historic bigotry has a role. Homelessness tragically disproportionately affects Black, brown, and LGBTQ populations—and it has for decades.

“The fact is more people are becoming homeless than the system can handle,” Ann Oliva, CEO of the influential Washington, DC-based National Alliance to End Homelessness, told me. “People are losing their housing—it’s just too expensive—and existing systems like behavioral health, child welfare systems, and the homelessness system overall have trouble exiting people from whatever they might have that’s temporary shelter into [permanent housing](#).”

So the poor stay poor, and the poorest fall to the streets. In America. The richest country on earth.

In San Francisco, a city of around 800,000 people, more than 4,000 people—about half of the total homeless count—sleep rough outside, what we call unsheltered, every night. And that’s an undercount.

What we have to remember is that every one of those people sleeping rough is worth saving.

When I was a kid on my own trying to figure out how not to starve and how to craft this journalism career that I have loved, I somehow managed to avoid hard drugs. And booze. And crime. It was all around me, and from the time I was on my own at 16, I could see how easy it would be to sink into any of those pits. And here’s a core thing I have learned in all these years of living and reporting: nobody *really* wants to be homeless.

Sure, you have some adventurers, wanderers like I was as a hitchhiking street singer with a guitar. But those journeys are mostly finite, and then you find stability. If you don’t, you wind up in misery. Or dead.

We should do better than to have homeless despair as one of our defining national characteristics. But can we? Only if we somehow restore those support struts of society that have been so decimated over the decades. And that’s a tall order.

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