

**TO: Mary Leslie, Los Angeles Business Council Institute and David Lauter, L.A. Times**

**FROM: Hart Research Associates**

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**RE: Voters' Perspectives on Addressing Homelessness in L.A. County**

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*From October 15 to 22, 2019, Hart Research conducted a telephone survey among 901 voters in Los Angeles County, including 107 interviews among Asians, 125 among African Americans, and 269 among Latino respondents. The survey has an overall margin of error of  $\pm 3.3$  percentage points. The survey instrument was developed in partnership with the L.A. Times, the UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs, and the Los Angeles Business Council Institute.*

### **Key Takeaways**

- L.A. County voters of all stripes view homelessness as a top-tier issue impacting the county. Majorities say they are personally affected by it, and significant numbers say that they or someone they know has experienced it recently. It's no longer viewed as a problem affecting only the most vulnerable, but something that can easily happen to "regular" people like them.
- Voters tend to believe that external societal factors—not choices made by individuals—are at the root cause of the problem, which impacts the possible solutions they are willing to accept. While a lack of affordable housing is seen as a major and growing problem, voters are even more likely to point to a lack of mental health services as a major driver of homelessness.
- While they do not necessarily think local government *currently* is addressing the problem effectively, they have not lost faith that it can be solved with the right set of policies in place. Large majorities support a variety of concrete policy proposals—both systemic solutions and more temporary ones—in order to address the issue.
- Voters tell us they want to see forward-looking solutions that will actually fix the problem over the long term. At the same time, however, there is a high degree of urgency around the issue, and large majorities of voters want to see the city take quick, tangible steps to address it—even if these changes feel new or unfamiliar, require additional resources, or may impact their own neighborhood.
- There is no one person, group, sector, or level of government that is seen as responsible for tackling the issue; indeed, it is viewed as an "all in" effort, with government (at all levels), businesses, nonprofits, law enforcement, and even residents themselves all having a role to play.

## Overview of the Problem

Broadly speaking, voters have a relatively negative outlook on the way things are going in Los Angeles County. Only one-third (32%) say things are going in the right direction today, while 46% say things are on the wrong track and another one in five (22%) is not sure either way. (This pessimism is a fairly recent development; just over three years ago, L.A. County voters said “right direction” by 46% to 35%.) This finding is consistent both within L.A. city limits and outside them. Remarkably, those who have lived in the county for anywhere between zero and 30 years are evenly split on this question, while the “lifers” (who have lived in L.A. for more than three decades) say things are going in the wrong direction by a 33-point margin (56% wrong track, 23% right direction). Those who say they are directly affected by the homelessness problem say things are off on the wrong track by 64% to 21%, while everyone else is more mixed on this measure (36% right direction, 40% wrong track)—suggesting the mood is heavily influenced by the homelessness issue.

In fact, the survey finds that homelessness is seen as a huge and pertinent problem countywide. Ninety-five percent of voters say it is a serious problem, including three-fourths (74%) who rate homelessness as a very serious problem—by far the most serious of the 11 issues we tested, and fully 14 points higher than “housing affordability,” the second-biggest problem (60% very serious). We did not measure any meaningful differences based on race or party registration on this score, but the problem is perceived as increasingly bad as you go up the income ladder, with 70% of the lowest-income voters, 75% of middle-income voters, and 78% of the highest-income voters saying homelessness is a very serious problem.

And voters do not feel that the money currently dedicated toward the problem is being spent effectively by their local government. When asked about Measures HHH and H, two-thirds (66%) say the revenue from those measures is being spent ineffectively, including 41% who say it is being spent *very* ineffectively. By contrast, only 22% think the money is being spent effectively (including just 5% who say it is being spent very effectively).

That being said, it is not as if voters have thrown up their hands and totally given up on their leaders’ ability to address the problem; indeed, we find a good deal of ambivalence in terms of their outlook on whether or not the problem can be solved. We asked voters to put themselves on a scale from negative five to positive five (on which a negative five is very pessimistic, and a positive five is very optimistic) when it comes to the ability of political and civic leaders in L.A. to adequately address the problem of street homelessness. All in all, 36% assign themselves a positive number on this scale, 41% assign themselves a negative number, and another 22% are caught in the middle and assign themselves a zero. (The intensity is on the side of the pessimists, with 24% rating themselves as a negative five and 16% rating themselves as a positive five.) We find that homeowners and those who have lived in Los Angeles the longest are the most pessimistic on this score, while renters and newer residents are much more mixed.

Additionally, a 56% majority of voters feel personally affected by the problem of homelessness (28% directly, 28% indirectly), while another 43% say it's a problem in the region but does not affect them directly. This is slightly higher within city limits, where 35% say it affects them directly (as do 34% of those who describe their area as high density). Compared with other groups, Asian voters are the least likely to feel directly impacted by the problem (at 15%), but we did not measure any major differences between other racial groups.

Voters' closeness to the problem has meaningful implications for how hopeful they are that the problem can be solved. Among those who say they are directly impacted, 53% are pessimists (put themselves at the negative end of the scale) and 26% are optimists (put themselves at the positive end of the scale). Among those who feel either indirectly impacted or not impacted at all, the balance of pessimists vs. optimists is much closer to even.

The problem of homelessness is not only prevalent, but for many it is close to home. A third of voters (34%) say they or someone they know has experienced homelessness or housing insecurity in the past year. Here, there are racial differences: 33% of whites, 34% of Latinos, 21% of Asians, and fully 54% of African Americans say they or someone they know has been homeless recently. Even a third (31%) of those in the highest income bracket (more than \$100,000 per year per household) say they have experienced it or know someone who has. In fact, several respondents in our focus group told us they feel like people like them, or even they themselves, are just one step away from falling into homelessness themselves:

- *"When I see a homeless person, I wonder how they got into that situation because we're all one circumstance away from being there."*
- *"Seven years ago, almost all my friends had one bedroom apartments. Almost no one can afford that anymore. And these are people who have decent incomes."*
- *"I'm retired, I'm an older person. Something could happen to my pension and I could not afford my rent."*

When we ask voters how they feel when they see someone who is homeless, the most common answer is some form of empathy (e.g., feeling sorry for them). However, this is mostly true among those who are affected by the problem only indirectly or are not affected by it. For those who feel *directly* affected by the problem, they are just as likely to mention the impact of mental illness, drug abuse, or a lack of shelter—indicating that the closer the problem is to home, the more nuanced and multi-dimensional it becomes.

Finally, three-fourths (75%) of voters support establishing a *legal right to shelter* in California, including nearly half (49%) who strongly support it. This includes majorities of registered Democrats (81%), Republicans (53%), and unaffiliated voters (74%), and includes large majorities across racial groups as well.

## Causes of Homelessness

In terms of root causes, nearly half (49%) of voters believe that homelessness is primarily due to external societal factors (e.g., lack of affordable housing, wages not keeping up with the cost of living), while a quarter (26%) say it is primarily a result of an individual's own actions. Another one in five voters (21%) are mixed, volunteering that it's some of both. Registered Republicans are more likely to point to individual factors as the cause (49%, compared with 18% of registered Democrats and 26% of unaffiliated voters). Among racial groups, African Americans are most likely to see housing and wages as at the core of the problem (59% to 19%, compared to 47% to 29% among whites and 35% to 31% among Asians).

This is another area in which voters' sentiment is driving their level of optimism about addressing the issue. Among those who tend to blame the individual, 53% are pessimistic (negative number on the scale) and 28% are optimistic (positive number on the scale) about L.A.'s ability to solve this problem. Among those who blame the societal factors, however, 37% are pessimistic and an equal 38% are optimistic—suggesting that, among those who see housing as key, there is potential that showing them concrete solutions will instill confidence that the problem is solvable. In fact, at the end of the survey—after we have presented a litany of potential policy solutions—those who blame external factors grow significantly more optimistic: 27% wind up on the pessimistic side, and 43% wind up on the optimistic side.

Importantly, housing and wages are not the only policy issues that may drive a person toward homelessness; indeed, a 44% plurality says homelessness is primarily a result of a lack of available mental health and social service resources, compared with 28% who blame a lack of affordable housing, and only 12% who see it as primarily a result of a decline in society's willingness to enforce the law and maintain public order. This view is held across liberals (46% mental health), moderates (47%), and conservatives (41%) alike. Even 51% of those who blame homeless individuals (not society) for their circumstances say the problem can be traced to a lack of mental healthcare, compared with only 24% who see a lack of effective law enforcement as the culprit. Notably, while pluralities of whites and Latinos see this as a mental health issue, the same cannot be said for African-American voters, who are more likely to blame the rising cost of living (45%) than a lack of mental health and social service resources (35%). (Asian voters are split, 41% to 40%.)

Several focus group respondents mentioned that mental health is a central part of what's driving the problem:

- *"I think mental health is a leading cause of homelessness. Addiction and mental issues need to be addressed."*
- *"Seventy percent of people who are homeless have mental issues. The others are disenfranchised. So, I have this vision of little villages or communities where these people live. The people who need jobs are employed by these*

*communities, helping the people who need mental help. Someday all these people could be reintroduced back into society because they have gotten the help they need."*

What's more, a whopping 90% of voters agree with the statement that "mental illness and substance abuse are underlying causes of homelessness. We should expand treatment facilities to help," including 72% who agree strongly. This statement garners wide agreement across racial, geographic, and partisan subgroups.

## **Finding Solutions**

The vast majority of specific solutions we tested—which run the gamut in terms of how much they would cost, what they would entail, and what specific aspect of the problem they seek to address—are supported by large majorities of the L.A. County electorate.

### ➤ **Who is Responsible?**

The survey finds that there is not a clear consensus about *who* is responsible for fixing the problem; it is notable that half of voters believe it is the responsibility of state (30%) or national (20%) officials, as opposed to local (29%) or regional (12%) ones. While pluralities of registered Republicans and unaffiliated voters believe the responsibility lies with local officials, we find little difference between "optimists" and "pessimists"—suggesting that voters' expectations for how this problem gets addressed may be complicated by the fact that there is not one single entity that is seen as shouldering the burden.

Furthermore, government actors are not the only ones seen as having a role to play. Nearly eight in 10 (78%) voters agree with the statement that "in addition to the public sector, the private sector—such as nonprofits and businesses—should also be playing an active role in addressing homelessness," including large majorities of Democrats, Republicans, and unaffiliated voters. Interestingly, however, while the nonprofit and private sectors are seen as having a responsibility here, voters do not necessarily believe that they would do a *better* job than the public sector: a much lower 53% agrees with the statement that "there would be faster and cheaper progress toward addressing homelessness if the government relied more on the private sector," while a third (32%) disagree and 16% are not sure either way. (Unlike the aforementioned statement, this one garnered only minority support from registered Democrats and only 53% support from registered Republicans.)

### ➤ **Short-term vs. Long-term**

Voters say they prefer long-term solutions over short-term solutions (59% to 23%) *when we explicitly say that doing so would save money in the long run*. As one focus group respondent put it:

- "A system needs to be in place. We can't spend money to take them from the street and they go back to the street again. We're just wasting money."

However, when we presented poll respondents with a more realistic trade-off (e.g., long-term housing that will take much longer vs. short-term housing that doesn't solve the long-term problem), voters are split (39% to 39%). Additionally, a 63% majority views this as an "emergency situation" for which current policies and funding are inadequate and that will require a break with longstanding practices, compared with only 26% who think Southern California basically already has the right set of policies in place to deal with the problem. So, there is definitely a healthy level of urgency and impatience in dealing with the problem. Even among those who tell us that they are not affected by homelessness in their own lives, 62% view it as an emergency situation and only 27% think the current policies are sufficient. And while we might expect Republicans to be reticent to throw more government money at any problem, they, too, think the current policies and funding are inadequate, by 53% to 31%.

Furthermore, the specific solutions we tested that treat the problem like an emergency are all supported by more than seven in 10 voters:

- Speed up development of temporary housing, such as emergency shelters and placement of trailers on public land (75% support)
- Using emergency relief tents, like those used by the Red Cross and FEMA, which can fit up to 200 people at a time until residents are connected to more permanent housing (73% favor)
- Opening up National Guard armories and other public property for temporary shelters, like is done during natural disasters and other emergencies (73% favor)
- Provide safe overnight parking areas to allow people to live out of their cars or campers while seeking permanent housing (71% support)

What's more, 85% agree with the statement that "homeless individuals need shelter and medical attention now. We should focus on getting them a place where they can live and get help immediately and then figure out long-term solutions," including 61% who agree strongly. And 76% agree with the statement that "we need to respond to the homeless crisis as we would a natural disaster. In this case, that means setting up temporary homeless shelters on available government property in urban areas around the region without lengthy government approvals."

We also asked voters about speeding up the development of *permanent* alternative housing, such as apartments built out of factory-built modular units, tiny houses, trailers, and other structures. This, too, garnered support from 75% of voters, and is seen as a particularly strong solution (84% support) among those who see a lack of affordable housing as at the root of the issue. Among the "movers"—those who start off pessimistic about solving the problem, but end up optimistic by the end of the poll—this is the most popular solution of all we tested (74% support it).

### ➤ **Specific Policy Proposals**

Importantly, several of the policies we tested are not only highly popular, but also viewed as potentially very effective in addressing the problem. We conducted a split-

sampled experiment in which we read voters the same list of policies, but half were asked whether they supported or opposed each policy, while the other half were asked how *effective* each one would be. All of them are supported and seen as effective by majorities of voters. What's more, we found remarkable consistency in terms of the rank-ordering on both these measures, with building temporary housing emerging as both the most popular and most effective solution in voters' eyes:

- Speed up development of temporary housing, such as emergency shelters and placement of trailers on public land (75% support, 77% effective)
- Allow for higher density, mixed-income housing, like four- to seven-story apartment buildings to be built in commercial and residential areas located near bus and rail lines (74% support, 68% effective)
- Provide safe overnight parking areas to allow people to live out of their cars or campers while seeking permanent housing (71% support, 64% effective)
- Encourage the use of shared housing (67% support, 63% effective)
- Provide money to help renters avoid eviction from their apartments (60% support, 61% effective)

Only one item fell short of the others in terms of popularity and perceived efficacy, although it still garners support from a slim majority of voters:

- Ban the conversion of apartment buildings to condominiums until the housing crisis is resolved (51% support, 50% effective)

It is important to point out, however, that while these items all garner *broad* support, it is not particularly deep. So, for example, while 75% support speeding up the development of temporary housing, only 45% support it strongly—and while 77% think it would be effective, only 41% say it would be “very” effective. (The number saying “strongly” support and “very” effective gets lower as we go down the list of items listed above.) This shows voters' openness to pursuing new and innovative solutions, but also reflects the fact that much of this is still uncharted territory.

We also tested four proposals specifically designed to add to the housing stock and make housing more affordable. Of these, three prove broadly (if not intensely) popular:

- Offering incentives to apartment building owners to extend affordable housing contracts that keep rents low for a period of time (68% favor, including 37% who “totally” favor)
- Promoting the building of more affordable housing by letting developers construct larger buildings along major commercial corridors if they include low-cost housing, as they currently can do near transit hubs (63% favor, including 31% who “totally” favor)
- Passing a rent-control ordinance that would limit rent increases to no more than the annual change in the consumer price index, a measure of inflation (61% favor, including 42% who “totally” favor)

The one exception here is “suspending the use of apartment units for vacation rental use and requiring building owners to lease them to renters,” which is favored by only 38% of voters.

Perhaps most encouragingly, we also asked voters about making changes *in their own neighborhoods*, and even here we measured majority support for three of the four proposals we tested. There is especially strong support for providing public restrooms for the homeless, reflecting voters’ concerns about public health and the unsanitary conditions the homelessness problem has wrought:

- Providing public bathrooms and showers to support homeless residents until longer-term solutions can be found (76% favor, including 51% who “strongly” favor)
- Using shed-like cabins, known as “Community Cabins,” equipped with cots, electricity, and plumbing as temporary housing for up to 40 people at a time until individuals are connected to more permanent housing (63% favor)
- Allowing the conversion of single-family homes to dorm-style housing developments where multiple tenants share kitchen, living and bathroom spaces, but have their own beds and micro-storage (55% favor)

Voters are less open, however, to allowing the construction of apartments on single-family parcels in their neighborhoods. Just 43% support this, while 40% oppose it.

Of course, most of these solutions will come at a cost. Even though voters overwhelmingly believe that the current funding meant to address the problem (from Measures HHH and H) is being spent ineffectively, letting the funding expire altogether is seen as too much of a risk: 58% say it should be renewed or expanded, compared with only 27% who want to let it expire. And even among the plurality who says HHH/H funding is being spent *very* ineffectively, two in five still say L.A. should renew the funding at current levels (23%) or even expand the funding (19%).

#### ➤ **Role of Law Enforcement**

While voters are certainly empathetic toward the homeless and willing to help them find assistance, they do not want to see the problem overrun the city, and are concerned about the ramifications of homelessness on their own lives and on the city writ large. And while unwillingness on the part of the city to maintain public order is not necessarily seen as a major *cause* of homelessness, it’s undeniable that law enforcement is seen as at least part of the solution. For example:

- 65% agree that “law enforcement should be more involved in helping clean up our streets in order to address the health crisis that is mounting due to unsanitary conditions caused by homeless encampments”
  - This includes majorities across racial, income, geographic, and partisan groups;

- 63% agree that “we can't allow homeless people to degrade residential neighborhoods or block access to offices and commercial buildings, so police departments should prevent people from sleeping on the streets” (*interestingly, several in our focus group mentioned making it illegal to sleep on the street as a humanitarian measure, in order to ensure that people are placed in shelters*)
  - This includes majorities across racial, income, geographic, and partisan groups;
  
- Only 33% agree that “as long as we don't have enough homes or shelters to house everyone, homeless Angelenos have the right to live on sidewalks and keep their property with them even if that makes it inconvenient for local store owners or nearby pedestrians,” while 60% disagree
  - Even among those who blame society (not the individual) for their circumstances—the most sympathetic group—only 44% agree with this notion.