

Rich Google yuppie execs and Tech Bros Want Homeless People Destroyed

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Why does San Francisco seem to have such a huge homeless problem?

by [Kashmir Hill](#)
Michael Rosen



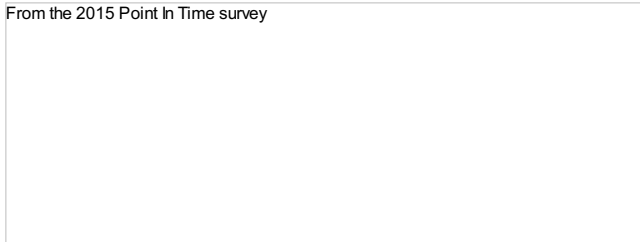
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In my neighborhood in San Francisco, a normal sight is tent cities set up by homeless people. Lately, the cities [have been growing](#). Homelessness in San Francisco, is, as the *Chronicle* dubbed it in a series begun in 2003, "[the shame of the city](#)."

From the 2015 Point In Time survey



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Every two years, America counts its homeless. This is San Francisco's last decade of counting.

This week, a tech entrepreneur [voiced his frustration](#) over having to see "homeless riff raff." Commando.io CEO Justin Keller wrote an [open letter](#) to San Francisco's mayor, complaining about the effect of the city's very visible homeless population:

The wealthy working people have earned their right to live in the city. They went out, got an education, work hard, and earned it. I shouldn't have to worry about being accosted. I shouldn't have to see the pain, struggle, and despair of homeless people to and from my way to work every day.

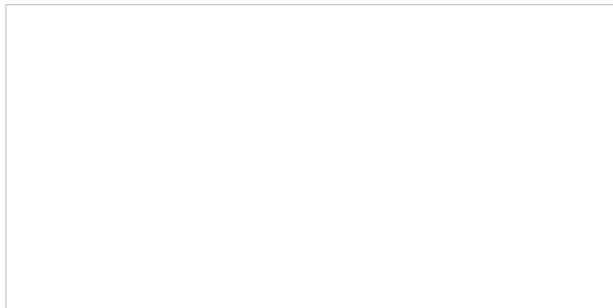
As the Guardian [points out](#), it's not the first time a "tech bro" has complained about the homeless. In 2013, the year that I moved here, two tech entrepreneurs complained that homelessness is worse and uglier in San Francisco than it is in the rest of the country. The homeless people are "crazier" here, [complained one](#). In other cosmopolitan cities, wrote a start-up CEO, the homeless people "keep to themselves" and "beg coyly" but "in downtown SF the degenerates gather like hyenas, spit, urinate, taunt you." The CEO later apologized after taking an online beating. On [Valleywag](#), Sam Biddle criticized his lack of empathy, but wrote, "he's very slightly right." Commenters on the article agreed that there's something *different and worse* about SF's homelessness problem.

Why does San Francisco's homeless problem feel worse?

"SF does not have more homeless people than other cities," Coalition on Homelessness, S.F. director Jennifer Friedenbach told me by email. "Urban areas in the U.S. have between 7 to 9% of their extremely low income population experiencing homelessness at any one time, and SF is right in there."

San Francisco does not have more homeless people than other cities.

Relative to the cities' populations, the over 6,000 people that are homeless in San Francisco is higher than in New York City, but lower than in L.A., Seattle, and D.C. What's different in San Francisco is the space. The city is just 46.9 square miles. "This is a tiny ass little fucking city," advocate for the homeless Paul Boden said to me by phone.

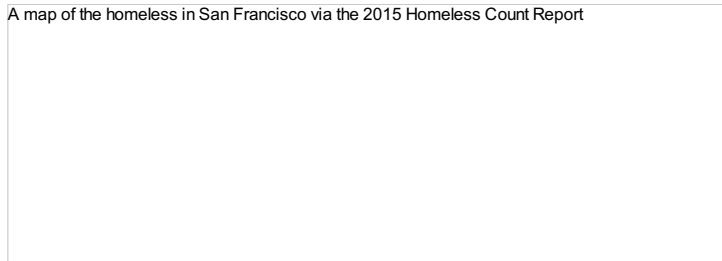


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Based on 2014 data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

San Francisco is second only to New York City for the densest homeless population by land mass. But in NYC, the homeless are "sheltered" at much higher numbers, meaning fewer people actually sleeping on the street.

San Francisco also differs from New York in the number of chronically homeless—the people who are not simply temporarily down on their luck, but near-permanent street dwellers. According to the 2015 Homeless Count Report, a biannual "Point-in-Time survey" that is done [across the nation in January](#), the chronically homeless were 7% of NYC's homeless population count and a quarter of San Francisco's. Friedenbach said homelessness is also more visible in SF because the poorest neighborhood—the Tenderloin—buts up against the city's commercial center, where start-up and tech workers head to work each day. The largest percentage of San Francisco's homeless are in District 6 which is also where you'll find the headquarters for companies like Twitter, Uber and Commando.io.



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A map of the homeless in San Francisco via the 2015 Homeless Count Report

"Secondly, somewhat related, is we do have a higher percentage of the general population of people experiencing mental illnesses here in SF," Friedenbach continues. "Some are housed some are not, but [nobody knows why](#)."



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A third of San Francisco's homeless population has psychiatric and emotional problems, according to the 2015 point in time survey

According to a [2013 report on homelessness](#) in San Francisco, 37% of homeless people suffered from a mental illness. The majority had chronic depression—unsurprising, given their circumstances—while 22% had a disorder like bipolar or schizophrenia.

Those demographics help explain why homelessness feels "worse." So then the question is why a city of such concentrated wealth and modern ingenuity as San Francisco hasn't figured out how to solve a problem that has plagued it for decades.



In 1984, homelessness as a chronic problem nationally was still a novelty. In a congressional hearing that year, city leaders from around the U.S. lamented homeless people who "exist like the untouchables of Calcutta, sleeping in streets and alleys and abandoned automobiles," in the words of Chicago's then mayor Harold Washington. "Homelessness in the United States has quietly taken on crisis proportions," said New York's then governor Mario Cuomo.

Before the 1980s, the only newspaper articles that mentioned "homeless" in San Francisco were about earthquakes.

Before the 1980s, the only newspaper articles that mentioned "homeless" in San Francisco were about earthquakes. But by 1980, the city realized it had a problem. A local church thought it had a solution.

That year a Methodist church bought a 50-by-100 foot lot on Sixth Street between Howard and Mission for \$73,000 and spent \$40,000 turning it into a park. "We saw hundreds of people standing around on the street in that area, drinking, talking, drifting," Rev. Cecil Williams of Glide Memorial Methodist Church told the [New York Times](#). "So we got the property and asked them what they wanted us to do with it. They told us they wanted a place where they would not be intruded on from the outside, even by the police. They wanted places to sleep, to sit at tables and to cook."

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The park had toilets, benches, a water fountain, a fire pit, greenery, shelter, and a [basketball hoop](#). Initially it had big concrete pipes to use as sleeping tubes, but they were removed after people fought over who would sleep in them and women were raped in them. Williams called it People's Park, but it was more often referred to as Wino Park.

In July 1982, a San Francisco Examiner writer named Paul Shinoff went "undercover" and lived there "as a bum for a month." Shinoff pretended to be an L.A. carpenter down on his luck, running from child support payments. He wore an old t-shirt, two torn sweatshirts, old jeans and steel-toed boots with \$5 tucked inside, and carried a pocket knife. He befriended his first "wino" by buying him a bottle of Thunderbird, which is still referred to 30 years later as "[bum wine](#)."

After spending time there for a month, including nights in a sleeping bag on the ground, Shinoff wrote a scathing story headlined "Nightmare in Wino Park" describing the place as a drug traffic center, where violent criminals rested between attacking people and "boosting cars."



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After the article, which church employees called "["distorted,"](#)" then-mayor Dianne Feinstein asked Rev. Williams to "do something with that park." In 1983, Williams gated it and put it up for sale. Living as a bum did not soften Paul Shinoff's heart toward the downtrodden. Two decades later, in February 2002, 8 months before his death, the award-winning labor journalist who went on to found a public relations firm [called for "throwing the bums out,"](#) saying 25 years of social experiments had failed. "The rights of citizens with beds to sleep in [have been] mostly ignored. They were forced to wake up and smell the urine, step over bodies, dodge shopping carts and fend off in-your-face panhandlers," he wrote more than a decade ago. "Nowhere in the country has the homeless population been as visible, or as tolerated, as in San Francisco." He sounds a lot like Justin Keller and the other tech entrepreneurs who now use Facebook and blogs, instead of newspapers, to voice their complaints. "It's time the homeless became the streetless," Shinoff concluded.



Paul Boden became homeless as a teen in New York. "I was 16. My mom died and my dad was an asshole," he told me. "I came home one day and he had sold the house and moved. I went from suburban white boy in Long Island to a couch surfer with my sisters." When one of his sisters moved to California, he followed. In 1983, when he was 22, he moved to San Francisco. "I thought it would be fucking warm," he says. Like many a visitor to San Francisco, he discovered hoodies are popular here for a reason.

They thought when the economy got better these guys would go home.

In the 1980s, funding for homelessness programs across the nation was described as temporary. "They thought when the economy got better these guys would go home," said Boden, who is now an advocate for the homeless at Western Regional Advocacy Center. But the homeless problem became a chronic one. Boden blames it on the [budget cuts to subsidized housing](#) in the early 80s, funding that went away and never came back. "All these people from subsidized housing started hitting the streets in droves. People just started sleeping on the floor of these churches and food programs," he says. In the 90s, Boden says there was a national competition between mayors: "Who could get the homeless out of sight fastest." Financial policies encouraged people to buy homes, not provide shelter to those without. "Assholes in the media started talking about 'compassion fatigue,'" he said. "People don't want to solve the homeless problem," Boden told me. "They just don't want to have to see it. Homeless people would have to simply disappear to appease them." Boden points to ways San Francisco has made life more difficult for its homeless, including the [closure of recycling centers around town](#), so that poor people can no longer collect trash for cash. Boden wants a homeless '[bill of rights](#),' that includes, for example, the [right to sleep in a legally parked car](#). "These guys are worried about, 'I see homeless people when I walk down Market Street. Fuck you. There are homeless kids on the street,'" said Boden. "It's mindblowing. The tip of the iceberg is what you see on Market Street."



The feeling of the "worseness" of San Francisco's homeless problem is not a new feeling. People have been complaining for decades. "Take away the homeless" wrote *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Arthur Hoppe in a 1990 editorial that [used humor](#) to mock those who were increasingly speaking out about SF's homeless problem. "We have created an economic system that produces \$5 trillion worth of goods and services every year. Yet we can't find enough to provide for those unable to make the system work for them," Hoppe wrote. "I have no pat solutions to their problems. But I'm pretty sure that unless we accept our guilt for each of them individually and all of them collectively, their problems—and ours—will be with us for a long, long time." That was 26 years ago.



Many people assume San Francisco offers more benefits to its homeless population than other cities thus "attracting" homeless types. [Peter Connerly](#) of Applied Survey Research has been collecting data on homelessness, particularly in San Francisco, since 1999. He disputed that San Francisco had more benefits, and called the assumption itself—the "magnet theory"—flawed. "It's a common thought that homeless respond in a market-based way to the availability of shelters and services, that they will move to areas where there are greater services available to them because services act like a magnet," said Connerly. "Researchers like us have regularly found that's not really the case, but it's hard to definitively kill the argument." Connerly told me by phone that homeless people don't move as "consumers of services." "They're moving around because they have friends or family in other cities," he said. "They move to a city because like anyone else, they think there's an employment opportunity. They're not really moving around to take advantage of infrastructure or available services or public safety tolerance." Connerly says services have not increased in SF. "The number of shelter beds is trending downward," he said. Connerly thinks the solution for homelessness is more federal funding, a bigger social safety net, and more community outreach programs. "From our perspective there's a real danger because the social safety nets are really tapped out right now," he says. "There's been no substantive increase in funding at the federal level."



Why are people in San Francisco homeless? When asked, homeless people state the obvious: Because they can't pay rent.

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Via San Francisco's Point in Time survey

What is the solution? Of course, because this is Silicon Valley, there are techie ones offered. A [homeless GoPro cam to build empathy](#). An "[app](#)" to find resources. A [tech lab for the homeless](#).

Some of these solutions are ridiculously simplistic. An app is not going to end homelessness, especially given the target population. When the homeless were asked in 2013 why they couldn't get a job, 28% of respondents said it was because they didn't have a phone. (There is a [federal program](#) that gives out phones to low income people; it is sometimes derisively called the [Obamaphone program](#).)

In the city with one of the [highest concentrations of billionaires in the world](#), it seems like we could get some better options.

San Francisco's 2016 [budget proposal](#) includes \$1.2 billion for "human welfare and neighborhood development," from which funding for homelessness programs comes. Plans for 2016, according to the budget, include 500 new "supportive housing units" for the homeless, 7 mobile restrooms in the Tenderloin to cut back on the amount of defecation on the street, and \$4.6 million to build a dedicated adult shelter with 30 beds, nurses and counseling for homeless people with chronic medical conditions. The budget notes that San Francisco provides emergency shelter for over 2,000 homeless people, but that's only a third of the homeless population.

San Francisco gave [tax breaks](#) to companies, like Twitter, that were willing to headquarter themselves on Market Street in the area that is ground zero for the homeless population. The hope was for corporate gentrification of a pretty rough zone. Now called "Mid-Market," it has reportedly simply pushed the homeless into nearby areas.

San Francisco also has [Project Homeless Connect](#), one-day events that seek to connect homeless and low-income people with essential services. And of course, like most cities, San Francisco has a "Homeward Bound" program that [promises to give people a one-way ticket out of the city](#). These programs don't seem to be putting a dent in the problem.

The only state that has dramatically solved its homeless problem is Utah. It did so by [giving homeless people homes](#) and providing them with counseling. Utah focused on its chronically homeless, cutting the size of that population by 91 percent over a decade. According to state officials, the solution has saved the state [millions of dollars](#). It's cheaper to give someone an apartment than to deal with the costs incurred from their living on the street, with police encounters, jail time and emergency room visits.

As the chronically homeless are such a large percentage of San Francisco's population, that seems like the best approach. But in a city where the cost of living is [skyrocketing](#) and nuns who help the homeless [get threatened with eviction](#) because the rent is too high, that's not an easy task.

To the tech entrepreneurs who keep complaining about San Francisco's homeless problem, know this: At the end of the day, the only way to end the homeless problem is to give people homes or [the funding and support](#) they need to find affordable housing themselves. There's not an app that will fix it. It's the kind of problem onto which you simply have to pour time and money.