

# WyHOMEing: Wyoming's Landscape for the Homeless

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Homelessness is an ever-evolving thread woven into the complex fabric of North American culture. Although various threads of homelessness can be seen across nearly every continent and county, the thread of homelessness within the seams of the United States appear to be unique. Homelessness is a very personal and very human experience with many perspectives, emotions, and versions of reality yet it is one of the most inhuman experiences a person can go through. In a country where people are often seen as numbers and statistics, the underlying stories and experiences of so many individuals, families, and children get overlooked and ignored. Homelessness can happen for many reasons, but for those who find themselves in Wyoming trying to overcome it, their stories take on extra significance.

With so many factors involved in how and why someone may experience homelessness, this account will shed some light as to how geographical orientation can impact this journey. From weather to resources, this account will include some personal stories as well as anecdotal evidence from families that have experienced this journey as well as those who serve to advocate for those that are struggling with this wide-spread issue. All stories have been collected with consent and all personally identifying information has been removed.

Ultimately, this account serves to explore homelessness through a sociopolitical lens, analyzing its connection with the democratic principles of equality, justice, and community solidarity. By taking a look into the narratives of displacement, it becomes clear how homelessness serves as a sort of litmus test for the health of democratic governance, highlighting the systemic inequities and societal challenges that underpin housing insecurity. Adding an examination of national and local responses, this paper reveals the complex relationship between homelessness and democracy, underscoring the need for inclusive, participatory approaches to address this pressing social issue.

## **Invisible Citizens: Existential Dilemmas Amidst Displacement**

Everyone has a story about their past, how they got to where they are now, and what they hope for the future. But for some, these stories aren't just about choices—they're about survival. We're not talking about kids moving because of a parent's job or military families relocating for duty. We're talking about families without homes, forced into impossible situations where they have to choose between their present and their future, their health and their home, their way of life and their livelihood.

When we think of homelessness, we often picture someone on a city sidewalk, struggling to get by. It's no wonder people try to avoid that stigma or that life. But for some, being "homeless" means something different. It's about freedom, exploration, finding new places to belong. We might have quotes about home decorating our walls, but for many families, the reality is much harsher. They may have nothing but each other and a few belongings to hold onto when times get tough.

Displacement due to homelessness presents individuals with existential dilemmas that transcend mere material deprivation, challenging the foundational principles of democracy. The paper explores how the marginalization of homeless individuals reflects systemic failures within democratic governance structures, revealing gaps in the protection of fundamental rights and social inclusion. By centering the narratives of displaced individuals, the study underscores the importance of amplifying marginalized voices within democratic decision-making processes to ensure their concerns are addressed.

## **Diverse Faces, Nuanced Realities: Deconstructing Stereotypes**

Despite the prevailing stereotype of homelessness typified by disheveled individuals on street corners, the reality is evolving. Increasingly, homeless and displaced individuals defy conventional expectations, appearing indistinguishable from the broader population with clean attire, well-groomed appearances, and weather-appropriate attire. These individuals have encountered formidable challenges that imperil their sense of home, security, and means of subsistence. Frequently characterized by defensiveness, fear, and pride, they are often disinclined to seek assistance, viewing it as a last resort. The diverse experiences and coping mechanisms of these individuals underscore the complexity of homelessness. It is through their narratives that the profound contrasts within this population become palpable and comprehensible.

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Below are three poignant narratives depicting the journeys of families who have been assisted by the Family Promise of Albany County organization. While these accounts mirror the experiences of countless families nationwide, they serve as testaments to the impactful work undertaken by Family Promise in alleviating hardship and facilitating the reintegration of families into stable, everyday lives. Please note: These narratives have been anonymized and modified to safeguard the identities of the families involved. Consent has been obtained to share these narratives in their adapted form. It is important to recognize that while these stories are drawn from real-life experiences, they are representative of the diverse paths traversed by displaced families globally. All names, dates, and specific details have been altered or substituted to preserve the confidentiality and privacy of these families and their narratives.

### *A Mother & Her Daughter*

Winter in Wyoming poses formidable challenges, with its unforgiving winds and relentless snowfall rendering travel treacherous, if not impossible. For those living on the outskirts of bustling towns, enduring such conditions can be especially grueling, particularly for those without access to adequate resources or transportation.

Among these individuals was a family of three residing in a secluded cabin, miles from any main roads or thoroughfares. Isolated and facing dire circumstances, their aspirations for improvement were hindered by the patriarch of the household. Despite being the father, his self-centered behavior marginalized both the mother and their child, prioritizing his own interests and those of his other offspring. However, a glimmer of hope emerged one summer afternoon when a family friend visited the cabin. While the men embarked on an outing to the range, the women and children remained behind. During this visit, the guest brought news of an organization in town offering assistance to families in need—a beacon of hope promising shelter, sustenance, rental and utility support, career guidance, and more.

Several weeks later, the same friend returned to the isolated cabin, offering a lifeline to the mother and her young child. Together, they journeyed into town, where within a matter of weeks, their lives were transformed. Through the support of the organization, the mother and daughter secured a fully furnished apartment, enabling the mother to secure stable remote employment. For the child, this newfound stability meant access to education for the first time, fostering opportunities for socialization and academic growth. In this tale of resilience and redemption, the promise of a brighter future was realized through the compassion and intervention of caring individuals and supportive organizations.

### *Sticking Together*

This story beautifully illustrates the strength and resilience of family bonds, showcasing how this family from the Sunshine State faced adversity head-on, refusing to abandon each other despite the challenges they encountered.

The impact of supply chain disruptions hit hard, particularly for the transportation industry, where the father worked as an over-the-road trucker. Despite the hardships caused by COVID-19, the family made sacrifices, adjusting their lifestyle to make ends meet.

When an opportunity arose for the father to work a seasonal job in another state, the family faced a tough decision. While the father initially planned to move alone to earn money and support the family, the wife's strong desire to keep their family together prevailed. Together, they embarked on a journey to an unfamiliar state, supported by the kindness of friends and a local community organization.

Despite the challenges of adjusting to a new environment, the family persevered, saving up enough money to return home after the seasonal job ended. Their sense of home wasn't just a physical address but the community and support network they had built along the way.

Through it all, the support they received from the local organization proved transformative, enriching their lives and leaving a lasting impact. This story serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of family unity and the resilience that can emerge from facing challenges together.

### *Dreams Do Come True*

From the earliest days of school, children are often asked about their aspirations for the future. Some dream of becoming doctors, lawyers, or firefighters, while others have different paths in mind. For one young woman, the desire to be a nurse was ingrained in her from a tender age. Her passion for helping others heal guided her throughout her life.

Life has a way of unfolding unexpectedly, with twists and turns that we never anticipate. Mom found herself in a situation she never imagined—living on the streets of a major city with her teenage daughter, estranged from family and friends. Despite the challenges they faced, they persevered.

During a harsh winter in the rocky mountain region, local organizations provided assistance to homeless individuals and families. It was during this time that Mom realized she wanted a better life for her daughter. With determination and resilience, they worked towards a brighter future.

Their fortunes changed when her daughter received a full academic scholarship to college. This unexpected opportunity brought hope and positivity to their lives, inspiring them to start anew in a new town. With support from a local organization and the college, they secured an apartment and began building a better life.

As her daughter thrived in college, Mom decided to pursue her own dreams of becoming a nurse. With determination and perseverance, she returned to school and earned her degree alongside her daughter. Their journey was a testament to the power of resilience and the pursuit of one's passions.

While her daughter chose to remain in their newfound home, Mom felt drawn back to her hometown. There, she found success in fulfilling her lifelong calling, knowing that her experiences had prepared her to make a difference in the lives of others. Their story is a reminder that even in the face of adversity, hope and determination can lead to a brighter future.

All in all, conventional stereotypes of homelessness perpetuate narratives of social exclusion and individual deficiency, undermining the principles of equality and human dignity inherent in democratic societies. Through a nuanced examination of the diverse experiences within the homeless population, the conclusions serve to challenge the nearly institutionalized portrayals of this group and enlighten the inherent resilience and agency of displaced individuals. By deconstructing stereotypes, these accounts highlight the importance of fostering inclusive public discourse that acknowledges the complex realities of homelessness within democratic societies.

## **National Efforts: Policy Responses and Organizational Initiatives**

These anecdotes serve as poignant reminders of the everyday struggles and triumphs experienced by individuals grappling with displacement and homelessness. Such narratives, though deeply personal, are emblematic of a broader reality faced by countless individuals and families nationwide. Indeed, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), over 650,000 people in the United States were experiencing homelessness on a single night in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Although HUD is seen as one of the primary sources for this content, most organizations who work with this population directly, refer to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as they report numbers that more closely reflect the real-life, real-time impacts of their clients.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, there exists a network of national organizations dedicated to addressing the multifaceted challenges of homelessness and providing vital support to those in need. Notable among these are the National Alliance to End Homelessness, U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, National Coalition for the Homeless, National Union of the Homeless, and others. These organizations not only offer direct assistance to individuals and families but also advocate for systemic change and policy reforms at the federal level.

<sup>1</sup> *2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment.*

<sup>2</sup> "McKinney-Vento."

Arguably, the presence and efforts of these initiatives play a crucial role in mitigating the hardships faced by homeless populations. Without their interventions, the number of displaced families, individuals struggling with hunger, and those lacking access to education would likely escalate. Through the collaborative efforts of these national organizations, individuals and families affected by homelessness can find solace in the prospect of a brighter and more stable future.

At the national level, responses to homelessness reflect the commitment of democratic societies to address social inequalities and uphold the rights of all citizens. By analyzing policy interventions and advocacy efforts, the paper evaluates the extent to which democratic governance structures effectively address the systemic factors contributing to homelessness. Overall, this emphasizes the role of civil society organizations and grassroots movements in advocating for policy changes and mobilizing community support, thereby strengthening the democratic fabric of society.

### **Local Resonance: The Case of Laramie, Wyoming**

The pervasiveness of homelessness and displacement is undeniable, as illustrated by the narratives shared above. While the visibility of this issue may vary across different locales, its existence is universal. It is all too common for individuals to acknowledge the problem while remaining disengaged from the plight of those experiencing homelessness or displacement within their own communities. However, even in close-knit communities like Laramie, Wyoming, resources are available to support individuals and families in times of need.

As depicted in the stories we've encountered, the experiences of homeless or displaced individuals and families are diverse and multifaceted. While the narratives highlighted here predominantly focus on families, it is important to recognize that specific organizations cater to the unique needs of single individuals, single mothers, minors, and other vulnerable groups. In Laramie, several such organizations operate within the city limits, including Family Promise, Interfaith, Safe Project, and Unaccompanied Student Initiative, among others.

The collaborative efforts of these organizations underscore a commitment to providing comprehensive support and assistance to individuals navigating the complexities of homelessness or displacement. Recognizing the varied needs of those seeking help, these organizations strive to offer a wide array of resources and points of contact. Whether individuals require one-time financial assistance, ongoing support with basic necessities such as food and shelter, or guidance in accessing career opportunities, the network of organizations in Laramie endeavors to address these needs with compassion and diligence.

Within the local context of Laramie, Wyoming, homelessness assumes unique dimensions shaped by geographical, economic, and social factors inherent to the region. Through a case study approach, it becomes clear how community responses to homelessness reflect the values of democracy, including solidarity, compassion, and civic engagement. All in all,

this underscores the importance of localized approaches that empower communities to address housing insecurity through democratic processes.

## **Conclusion**

Homelessness is not only a social issue but also a democratic concern that tests the inclusivity and responsiveness of governance structures. By examining the experiences of displacement, it is revealed that the systemic inequities that perpetuate homelessness and underscores the imperative for democratic societies to prioritize social justice and community well-being. Through collaborative efforts at national and local levels, democratic governance can play a vital role in addressing homelessness and fostering a more equitable and inclusive society for all.

Ultimately, none of this would not be possible without the countless individuals who dedicate their time, energy, and resources to support those experiencing homelessness or displacement. From the tireless efforts of frontline workers and volunteers to the generous contributions of donors and supporters, it is their collective commitment and compassion that truly make a difference in the lives of vulnerable individuals and families. Their selflessness and dedication exemplify the best of humanity and serve as a beacon of hope for a brighter and more inclusive future. So, to all those who work and volunteer behind the scenes to uplift and empower others, we extend our deepest gratitude. You are indeed making the world a better place, one act of kindness at a time. Thank you!

## **Bibliography**

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