

A photograph of a person lying face down on a sidewalk. They are wearing a grey hoodie, black pants, and white sneakers. A cardboard box is positioned to their left. The scene is set in an urban environment at night, with a building facade and a sign for 'ICE & VICE' visible in the background. The sign also mentions 'SMART ICE CREAM' and '5% TO QUALITY'.

IS HOMELESSNESS A CHOICE?

(Spoiler Alert: No.)

Zoe

Is Homelessness a Choice?

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Zoe', located in the bottom right corner of the page.



INTRODUCTION

The Housing Crisis in America is a multifaceted & complex issue, intertwined with even more multifaceted & complex issues. Homelessness (I'm defining it here just to be very clear moving forward), is a state of having no housing and in many cases not even shelter. In 2024, endhomelessness.org reported:

"a record-high 653,104 people experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2023. This is more than a 12.1 percent increase over the previous year."



Homelessness can affect any individual for any number of reasons. The truth is that there is seldom a singular cause to blame for someone having no access to housing. Many people argue that homelessness is a direct result of personal choices made by an individual. That a person “decides” to be homeless, usually due to the following:

1. **Substance abuse or Drug addiction**
2. **“Laziness” or unwillingness to get a job**
3. **Apathy/indifference towards already existing support systems**

On the surface these arguments seem to answer the question of why homelessness exists, in a concise and direct way. The problem with these arguments is that they’re often framed as a moral failure, while also promoting the idea that it is up to the individual experiencing homelessness to fix their situation alone. This discourse fails to ask why someone would use drugs, why they supposedly lack the motivation to join the workforce, and why these people supposedly distrust the support that we already have for them. Using these arguments to explain the existence of homelessness ignores underlying factors in people’s lives and only looks at symptoms rather than the causes of homelessness. Further, real solutions to the problem are rarely (if at all) discussed within the confines of these arguments as the basis of conversation about homelessness.



SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

What may seem like moral failure, or susceptibility to use substances unhealthily is actually an extremely nuanced subject. The factors that determine drug addiction span far and wide. What we do know is that:

“A person’s biology, environment, and development have the largest impact on rates of drug addiction.”

(National Institute of Drug Abuse)

Is your biology, environment or development a conscious, individual choice?

“LAZINESS” OR UNWILLINGNESS TO GET A JOB

There are various reasons an unhoused person may not have a job. It’s important to look at statistics here, because the stereotype of unhoused people being too lazy to get a job is not only harmful, but a false statement.

“About 53 percent of the sheltered homeless had formal labor market earnings in the year they were observed as homeless, and the authors’ find that 40.4 percent of the unsheltered population had at least some formal employment in the year they were observed as homeless. This finding contrasts with stereotypes of people experiencing homelessness as too lazy to work or incapable of doing so.”

(Learning About Homelessness Using Linked Survey and Administrative Data, University of Chicago)

Over half of people who are unhoused in multiple studies are working, why are they still experiencing homelessness? Is the cost of living your choice?



APATHY/INDIFFERENCE TOWARDS ALREADY EXISTING SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Finally, the “Homeless people prefer living on the street” argument. This argument correctly points out that we are investing money & resources to relieve homelessness. Where it fails is when the blame is shifted not onto the people experiencing homelessness, because they aren’t using the systems we’ve put in place. This is false. If institutions aren’t being used by the homeless, it is more likely to be due to crowding, lack of hygiene, or even abuse.

“People on the street often reject the option of crowded, unsafe shelters—not housing in general.”

(NYU, The 12 Biggest Myths about Homelessness in America)

Are the living conditions in shelters a choice made by unhoused people?



HONEY'S STORY

In an interview with Soft White Underbelly, Honey – a teenager experiencing homelessness – said this:

“To be honest, I really don’t like how I was raised, where I was raised, and what I am today; I wish I grew up differently.”

In the same interview Honey later states “I’m trying to change, but it’s going to be hard for me,” she then explains how therapy, rehabilitation, and a chance to go to school would help or solve her situation. Honey has been abused by almost everyone in her life since she was born, and has been homeless since she was 14. She “sells her body” to make money. Honey lost her daughter 2 days before the interview, which had been “the saddest day in her life”.

Even though it’s hard to hear and see, this interview helped me gain more insight and empathy for the people experiencing these kinds of situations. I highly recommend watching the full video.

Considering homelessness to be a choice directly removes empathy for people like Honey, and the circumstances that they endure. Implying choice encourages an individualistic mindset in which people are left to fend for themselves, rather than be uplifted by those who haven’t had to experience homelessness.



SO, IS HOMELESSNESS A CHOICE? THE SHORT ANSWER IS: NO.

If you want the long answer, NYU has you covered:

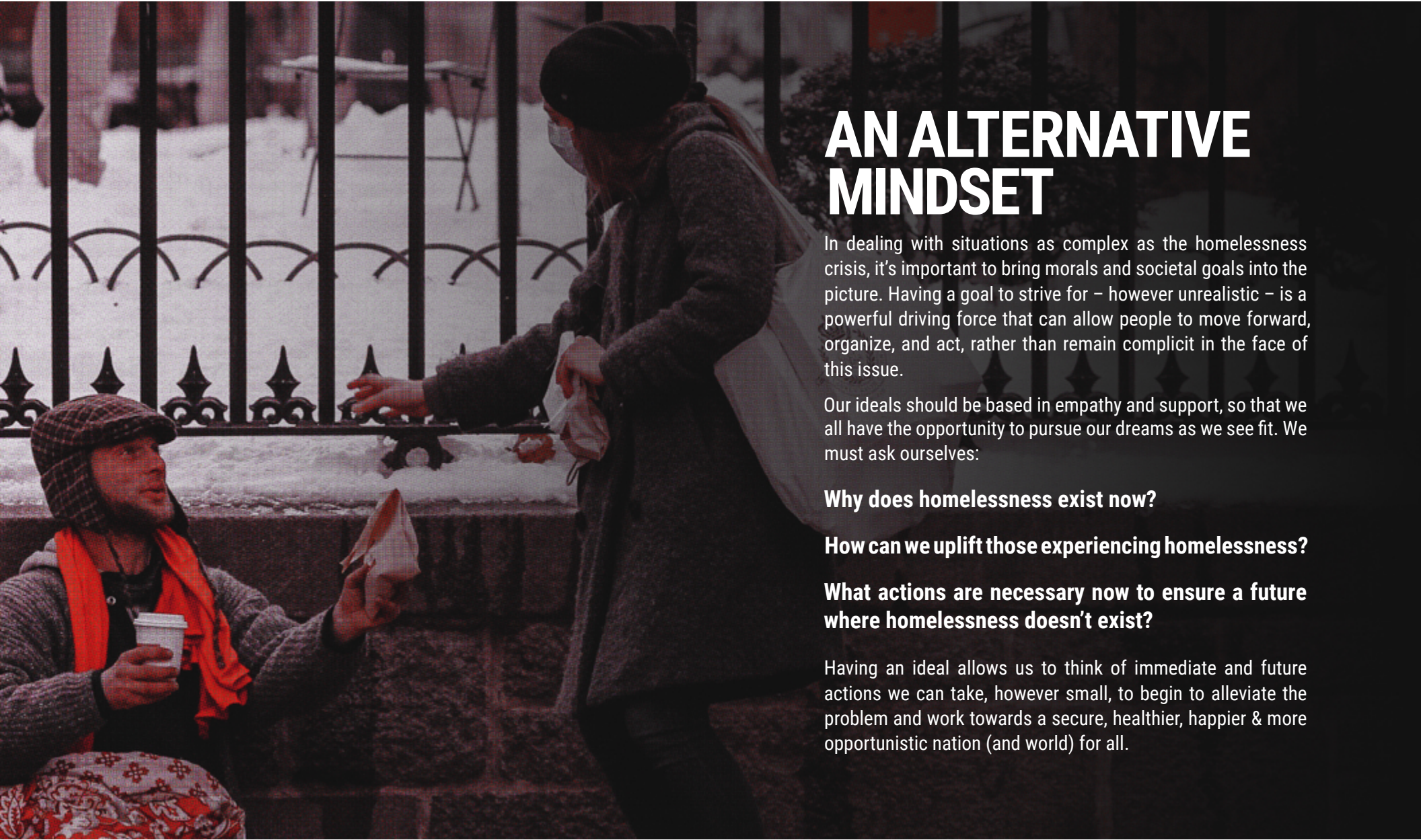
“There is no evidence to support this notion that homeless persons are ‘service resistant.’ Since ‘Housing First’ began in New York City in 1992 at the nonprofit Pathways to Housing, Inc., it became clear that the offer of immediate access to independent housing with support services is welcomed and accepted by most homeless.”

(NYU, The 12 Biggest Myths about Homelessness in America)

I’d like to take this argument one step further by stating that not only is “Is homelessness a choice?” an irrelevant question, but perpetuates an ideology in which the victim is at fault for their circumstances - which is more often false than it is true. The question allows us, as a society, to willfully ignore those who are experiencing homelessness and its trials. By implying that people are unhoused by choice, we therefore don’t need to help them, because they “want” to be there. No solutions are made and no support is offered when you consider homelessness to be a choice.

“This myth enables apathy and maintains the nation’s status quo of too many people experiencing homelessness in an urgent affordable housing crisis.”

(Urban.org Ruth Gourevitch, Mary K. Cunningham)



AN ALTERNATIVE MINDSET

In dealing with situations as complex as the homelessness crisis, it's important to bring morals and societal goals into the picture. Having a goal to strive for – however unrealistic – is a powerful driving force that can allow people to move forward, organize, and act, rather than remain complicit in the face of this issue.

Our ideals should be based in empathy and support, so that we all have the opportunity to pursue our dreams as we see fit. We must ask ourselves:

Why does homelessness exist now?

How can we uplift those experiencing homelessness?

What actions are necessary now to ensure a future where homelessness doesn't exist?

Having an ideal allows us to think of immediate and future actions we can take, however small, to begin to alleviate the problem and work towards a secure, healthier, happier & more opportunistic nation (and world) for all.

HOW CAN I HELP?

IMMEDIATE SOLUTIONS

Speak Up

Learn about the root causes of homelessness, and share this knowledge to raise awareness. Advocate for programs, rights, and support systems for those experiencing homelessness. Understanding the complexity of the issue helps counter stereotypes and foster empathy.

Volunteer

Offer your time to local shelters and food banks, or participate in community outreach programs that support those experiencing homelessness. Your direct involvement can make a significant difference in their lives.

Donate

Contribute financially and materially to organizations working to alleviate homelessness, such as those providing emergency shelter, affordable housing, and job training programs. Every donation helps fund critical services that support individuals in need.

By stabilizing people through shelter, moving them into permanent housing, and implementing assistance programs to keep them in their housing, we can not only reduce, but eliminate, homelessness.

SOURCES

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**Learning about homelessness using linked
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TEDx – Zapata, M. A.

Honey's interview
Soft White Underbelly

**Dismantling the harmful, false narrative
that homelessness is a choice**
Urban Institute

Proven solutions
Coalition for the Homeless





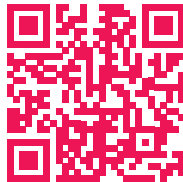
Zoe

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zoe Allgaier is a digital artist from Utah. She is inspired by the early age of digital art; Her abstract work explores the intersectionality of digital and physical life. Using overlays, textures and recursive geometry, Zoe creates graphics that explore visual nuance, as well as reject the minimalist design trends that have become the standard in the postmodern era. She has a lifetime of experience as an artist, and 7 years of professional experience in digital media and design roles.

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More often than not, it seems as though we blame the people enduring homelessness, as if they decided to be there. This is harmful, un-empathetic and offers zero solutions to the conditions that real people face daily.



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