

U.S.

Houston, we have a solution: How the city curbed homelessness

Christian Science Monitor, by Henry Gass, Monday, November 18, 2019, 7:55 AM PST

Growing up in rural Louisiana, J.R. Richard loved being outdoors.

Want a 103 mph fastball? How about a 98 mph slider? Mr. Richard would recommend you spend the bulk of your childhood in the woods, throwing rocks at just about anything you can.

Birds, rabbits, 18-wheelers – you name it, young J.R. probably threw a rock at it. He credits those days in the woods around Ruston with developing his once-electrifying arm strength. Inheriting the growth curve of his maternal grandfather, who spent his days hauling logs with draft horses out of the woods, didn't hurt either. By the time he graduated from high school he stood at 6 feet, 8 inches tall and 220 pounds.

Having never lost a start in his high school career – in his senior year he didn't allow a single run – he was perhaps the most famous high school athlete in the state at the time. The Houston Astros drafted him second overall in the 1969 amateur draft.

He made his major league debut two years later, striking out 15 San Francisco Giants – including legend Willie Mays three times. Mr. Richard could look back on those long days in the rural Louisiana woods as time well spent.

But as much as he loved being outdoors as a kid, he never imagined he would end up living there.

His memory of the roughly 12 months he spent homeless in Houston in the mid-1990s is blurry, likely from brain damage caused by the strokes that ended his baseball career, at age 33, a decade earlier.

“Basically a lot of walking around,” he recalls. “Walking around, getting something to eat.”

When he wasn't walking around, he spent a lot of time living under a bridge at 59th and Beechnut Streets, just a few miles from where he used to pitch at the Houston Astrodome. At one point he only had \$20 to his name.

“The mind can adjust to whatever. So you've been out there so long you feel, ‘OK, it's OK to be out here. I feel like I belong right here.’ But that's not OK,” he says over breakfast one September morning in Houston, his giant hands tracing a knife and fork through eggs and toast.

“A few days in homelessness, then you would really understand [what it's like], how you really depend on other folk,” he adds. “I don't care how much you got, or who you are, you can't live in this world by yourself and survive.”

At a time of widening income inequality, rising housing costs and growing housing insecurity, homelessness has stayed relatively steady. Homelessness increased by 0.3% from 2017 to 2018, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), but chronic homelessness – those who have been homeless for a year or more, or at least four times in three years – decreased by 26% from 2007 to 2018.

These trends have also been playing out across Texas – except in Houston, which has emerged as a national leader in tackling homelessness. The Bayou City has decreased its homeless population by 54% since 2011, by one measure, as well as effectively eliminated homelessness among veterans. (Austin, San Antonio, and Abilene have also effectively eliminated veteran homelessness.)

In recent months, homelessness has also become curiously politicized, with Republican leaders criticizing urban Democratic strongholds over their homelessness policies. But advocates for tackling the issue are hopeful that both the newfound political attention, and the actual success cities like Houston have had, could lead policymakers to realize that homelessness can be addressed more effectively and, ultimately, eliminated. The benefits, they add, can be both moral and financial.

“I would say we’ve done well. I’m not going to give us a bunch of props, because we need to keep doing better,” says Mike Nichols, interim president and CEO of the Coalition for the Homeless in Houston.

“There will always be people coming into homelessness,” he adds. “But we can solve it. It’s not an insolvable problem. ... It’s a finite problem, with solid solutions.”

Shift in priorities

Disagreement over how to solve it abounds. But before addressing an issue, you need to know how big it is. With homelessness, that has been its own challenge.

One of the most widely used methods of counting a homeless population is called a point-in-time (PIT) count. Homeless support groups around the country conduct a headcount of the population on a single night during the last 10 days in January, submitting it to HUD in applications for federal funding.

The PIT is an imperfect method of tracking homelessness – excluding all those who may move in and out of homelessness the rest of the year, for example, and those who are “housing insecure,” living in substandard, overcrowded, or transient housing – but it provides a good year-on-year baseline.

Houston’s homeless population peaked in 2011, with 8,538 people counted in the PIT. That was the year everyone working on tackling homelessness in the city, from HUD and the mayor to nonprofits and business leaders, decided to, as Mr. Nichols recalls, make “an organized effort to look to solutions, as opposed to [just] managing the problem.”

A few short-term goals were targeted – then achieved. One hundred homeless veterans were housed in 100 days. The next step was creating more permanent housing units linked to support services. Since 2011, the city has developed more than 2,400 such housing units, and housed 17,000 people, with 84% of them maintaining that place of living, according to Mr. Nichols.

Perhaps the most important shift since 2011 is improved organization. In the past, siloed nonprofits would focus on running a shelter, serving food, or providing clothing. Organizations and officials are now in constant communication, including regularly updating a database called the Homeless Management Information System. The HMIS lets the organizations know where an individual has been, as well as the services they have and haven’t received. It has helped the city individualize how it aids people experiencing homelessness, and prioritize the most vulnerable.

Houston also aggressively pursued a “housing-first” approach – essentially getting homeless individuals and families permanent housing first, then helping them find stability by

addressing whatever other issues they might have. Alternatives to that approach require people to meet conditions, such as sobriety or employment, first before they can “earn” housing.

Numerous studies have backed the effectiveness of a housing-first approach since cities began adopting it in the 1990s. One 2015 study found that over a 24-month period, people who participated in housing-first programs in four Canadian cities had stable housing 63% to 77% of the time, compared with 24% to 32% for people who received more traditional care.

There is also a cost argument for housing first. Chronic homelessness costs the public \$30,000 to \$50,000 per person per year, compared with \$20,000 per person for supportive housing, according to the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness.

But housing first can be difficult to implement. Number one, a city needs to have enough permanent affordable housing available. Amid an affordable housing crisis – there is no county in the country where a renter working 40 hours a week on minimum wage can afford a two-bedroom apartment, the National Low Income Housing Coalition reported last year – that is becoming increasingly difficult.

Number two, it can be difficult for some communities to support the idea of helping provide housing to people who may not have “earned it,” who may still be addicted to drugs, for example.

“We do have, around the state and the country, the belief that you have to pull yourself up from your bootstraps,” says Eric Samuels, president and CEO of the Texas Homeless Network.

“We used to think, ‘We’re wasting a housing unit on that person; they’re using [drugs].’ But the data shows that’s the opposite,” he adds. “All we’re saying with this is give someone a chance ... to be stable long enough to pull themselves up.”

The 2019 PIT count registered just over 3,900 homeless people in Houston. The city has benefited in recent years by having more affordable housing stock than most cities, Mr. Samuels adds. “But the dedication to doing something about it, every community can do; investment in affordable housing any community can do; and the coordination when it comes to working with people at-risk or experiencing homelessness is something every community can do.”

Personalized solutions

Homelessness can arrive suddenly. For J.R. Richard, it arrived as suddenly as baseball superstardom.

Ten years after graduating from high school he was one of baseball’s most dominant, and highest paid, pitchers. He finished the 1979 season with 18 wins and 313 strikeouts over 292 innings, and a new four-year contract with the Houston Astros worth \$850,000 a year.

Nine months later in the Astrodome, he had the stroke that would ultimately end his career. When his last comeback fell short in 1984, the descent began.

He lost \$300,000 in a California oil investment scam, and a dozen Arabian stallions he had bought disappeared. He lost custody of his five children in a divorce settlement with his first wife. Courts ordered him to pay her \$669,000 in the settlement. He married again and bought a house in the Houston suburbs, but lost it in a second divorce. When his truck broke down on the way to San Antonio for some autograph appearances, he couldn’t afford to fix it and it was repossessed.

Depressed and unable to afford a doctor’s visit, let alone rent, he moved from friend to friend, ending up under the bridge at 59th and Beechnut Streets.

“I never thought in a million years that I would be homeless,” he says. “Nobody in the world expects to be homeless.”

If that were to happen to Mr. Richard today, resources would likely be in place to keep him off the streets for too long. But while the homeless population has been declining in Houston, it’s been ticking up in other Texas cities.

Austin’s homeless population could well be much larger, but even at 4,000, that would still be just a 10th of the undergraduates enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin last year – enough to fill a bleacher section behind the south end zone of the school’s football stadium. Homelessness is not a vast, intractable problem, says Judith Knotts, an Austin advocate for homeless people, but it is complex. The solutions have to be personalized, and they have to be as much preventive as reactive.

Ms. Knotts, a retired educator and author, has been living on the streets for periodic spells since 2003. She’s met accountants who were homeless because of alcoholism. She befriended a homeless man with a second-grade education who’d been abandoned by his mother. “There’s just so many reasons [they’re] out there,” she says. “I’ve been told by homeless people, it takes two weeks before you actually feel homeless and you start to think in that way,” she adds. “We [need to] get to them before that happens.”

In Houston, that has meant finding them affordable housing – meaning both shelters and affordable rental properties – as soon as possible. It’s easier to do that when housing is affordable, and that’s one reason cities with booming housing markets like Austin and Dallas have found it more difficult to reduce their homeless populations.

A Houstonian has to make \$21.23 an hour to afford a two-bedroom apartment, according to a report this year from the National Low Income Housing Coalition. An Austinite, meanwhile, has to earn \$25.29 an hour, while someone living in Dallas has to earn \$23.10. The minimum wage in Texas is \$7.25 an hour.

Home prices in Dallas grew 42% between 2006 and 2018, fourth most in the U.S. over that time, according to a 2019 Harvard University report. Austin was first, with home prices increasing 55%. At the same time, shelter space in Dallas and Austin has not kept pace. Dallas has not added new bed space for several years and has seen its unsheltered homeless population increase 725% from 2009 to 2019. Austin’s unsheltered homeless population increased 34% from 2018 to 2019.

“If communities like Austin are able to have the successes Houston has had they’re going to have to develop more stock of affordable housing,” says Mr. Samuels.

Room for improvement

Austin is working to do just that, but details remain hazy. City officials came under fire this summer after passing a new ordinance largely decriminalizing sitting, laying, and camping in public places, particularly in the downtown core. The relaxed enforcement led to an influx of people experiencing homelessness to the city’s downtown. While the actual homeless population hasn’t increased significantly, experts say, complaints and fears about it have. (In September, President Donald Trump criticized California Democrats for the state’s large homeless population, threatening federal intervention.)

In October, citing his responsibility “to protect the health and safety of all Texans,” Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said the state would intervene to address Austin’s “homelessness crisis” if local officials did not act. The city council did later vote to revise the camping ordinance. State

agencies began clearing illegal encampments last month and created a campground for homeless people on five acres in the city's southeast.

"I would love to see the power of our state agencies be utilized to [address] this situation ... in a way that is positive and collaborative," says Mr. Samuels. "I hope that more attention and resources are drawn to the issue. Perhaps that is naive but that is my hope."

Resources are important, but for Mr. Richard they pale in significance to the resources a person experiencing homelessness has to marshal within themselves.

"You can't help nobody that doesn't want to help themselves," he says. "If you want to get out of homelessness you can get out the homeless, but it's in you to get out of homelessness."

On that point at least, Ms. Knotts disagrees with him. Personal responsibility is important, she says, but what everybody needs is "one person who believes in you and helps you."

"No matter how fabulous all the policies and decisions they make [are] about what center's going to open and who's going to go there," says Ms. Knotts, "that's all for naught unless each homeless person has [someone] cheering them on."

"That's something we as laypeople, we as not homeless people, that's something we could do."

Like most other experts, she doesn't think America will ever reach zero homelessness. There will always be people who don't want to leave the streets, she says, but "we're really getting better."

Houston still has room for improvement, Mr. Nichols says, noting the 27,000 children in the tri-county area who were homeless and insecurely housed last year.

There will always be some homelessness, Mr. Nichols adds, "but we ought to have a system to make homelessness rare, brief, and non-reoccurring."

"That's our goal," he continues. "And again I think that's possible."

