

More Than a Meal: A Reflection of Homelessness in San Diego

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San Diego is proudly known as "America's Finest City" because of its beautiful beaches, year-round sunshine, and high quality of life. It is also home to affluent communities such as La Jolla and Mount Helix. Behind this image is a growing homelessness crisis that affects thousands of people throughout the county. Driving through downtown San Diego, El Cajon, near Petco Park, or other neighborhoods, it is common to see people sleeping on sidewalks, under freeway overpasses, in parks, or carrying everything they own in shopping carts. As I conducted my research, I also learned that homelessness is not always visible. Many people experiencing homelessness are living in their cars, staying in shelters, or moving from place to place while trying to keep a job or keep their children in school. Seeing this contrast made me wonder how a city known for its beauty and prosperity could also have so many people without a safe place to live.

I chose this topic because I volunteer once a month with the Fresh Start Saturday program at La Mesa First United Methodist Church. During each event, I help prepare breakfast for people experiencing homelessness while community volunteers distribute clothing, hygiene items, bus passes, and other essential resources. I also observed members of the City of La Mesa's Homeless Outreach Mobile Engagement (HOME) team connecting people with services such as CalFresh, Medi-Cal, General Relief, CalWORKs, and housing resources. One observation that stood out to me was that everyone wore a name tag, including the guests experiencing homelessness. At first, I thought the name tags were simply a way for people to learn each other's names. As I continued volunteering, I realized they represented something much deeper. Everyone was treated with the same respect and dignity, and people were greeted by their names rather than being defined by their circumstances. That small detail showed me that helping people is not only about providing food or services, but also about

recognizing their humanity. These experiences helped me realize that homelessness is much more than what I see on the streets and inspired me to learn more about the issue.

My observation methods included participant observation through volunteering, direct observation of homelessness throughout San Diego, and research using documentaries, expert interviews, news articles, local reports, and scholarly sources. These different methods allowed me to compare my personal experiences with the research and better understand the issue from multiple perspectives.

Before beginning my research, I believed that most people experiencing homelessness had brought it on themselves. I expected my research to confirm these beliefs. Instead, my firsthand experiences and the evidence I gathered challenged many of my assumptions. I learned that homelessness is a complex issue influenced by high housing costs, financial hardship, physical and mental health challenges, and limited access to affordable housing and support services. This paper reflects on how my understanding of homelessness changed through volunteering and research and explains why addressing homelessness requires both compassion and long-term community solutions.

One of the biggest things I learned during my research was that homelessness is much more than an individual problem. Before starting this project, I believed homelessness was mostly caused by poor personal choices, such as drug use or refusing to work. However, my research challenged those assumptions. Zapata (2020) explains that stable housing is the foundation people need to improve other parts of their lives. Without a safe place to live, it becomes much harder to keep a job, manage health problems, or even take medication regularly. Kushel (2023) also explains that many people become homeless after experiencing a financial crisis, illness, or another unexpected life event. Colburn and Aldern (2022) support these ideas by arguing that communities with the highest housing costs and the fewest

affordable housing options often have the highest rates of homelessness. Their research helped me better understand what I see throughout San Diego. Although the city is known for its beautiful weather and high quality of life, it is also one of the most expensive places to live, with a high cost of living and a shortage of affordable housing. I realized that when people experience a job loss, medical emergency, or another unexpected hardship, they may have very few affordable housing options. The Regional Task Force on Homelessness (2025) reports that homelessness continues to be a major challenge throughout San Diego County, reinforcing what I observed in my own community. As I reflected on my research, I realized that the people I had seen while volunteering at Fresh Start and throughout San Diego were facing challenges that were much more complicated than I had once believed. I now understand that homelessness is not simply about individual choices. It is also connected to the high cost of housing, limited affordable housing, and unexpected life events that can quickly leave people without a stable place to live.

One of the most meaningful things I learned during this assignment was that every person experiencing homelessness has a unique story. Long before I began volunteering at Fresh Start, I had an experience that stayed with me. I was about ten years old when my mom and I were driving down Imperial Avenue in Lemon Grove during a heavy rainstorm. She noticed an African American woman standing at a bus stop with her two daughters, who looked to be about seven or eight years old and were still wearing their school uniforms. My mom pulled over and asked if they needed a ride. They accepted, and she drove them to a homeless shelter in downtown San Diego. At the time, I did not fully understand what homelessness meant, but I remember wondering why children my age were living so differently than I was. Looking back, I realize the girls' school uniforms represented much more than I understood as a child. Their mother was doing everything she could to keep her daughters together and continue their

education despite not having a stable place to live. That experience stayed with me and helped me better understand the stories I encountered during my research.

The ABC 10News stories reinforced this idea. One story followed a San Diego college student who continued pursuing an education while experiencing homelessness (Horn, 2019). Another featured a single mother who worked hard to keep her family together despite losing stable housing (Hunt, 2019). What stood out to me was that neither person fit the stereotype I once had of someone experiencing homelessness. Instead, they were focused on building a better future for themselves and their families. These stories reminded me that homelessness is not just a statistic. Every person has a different path that leads to homelessness, and many are doing everything they can to create a better life. My observations taught me to look beyond assumptions and recognize the determination, hope, and resilience of the people behind the statistics.

One of the biggest observations I made during this project was that homelessness affects the entire community, not just the people experiencing it. Before I began my research, I mostly thought about homelessness as an issue that affected individuals. However, I learned that it also impacts neighborhoods, schools, libraries, businesses, and public spaces throughout San Diego. The Regional Task Force on Homelessness (2025) explains that responding to homelessness requires cooperation among local governments, service providers, nonprofit organizations, and community members. I also learned from Urada et al. (2022) that places like the San Diego Central Library have become important locations where people experiencing homelessness can connect with social workers and community resources. This observation helped me realize that solving homelessness is not the responsibility of one organization or one program. It takes many people working together to provide housing, healthcare, mental health services, employment assistance, and other support. As I reflected on everything I learned, I realized that everyone has a role to play. Some people volunteer, others donate, and many work

in organizations that connect people with the resources they need. My experience at Fresh Start showed me that even small acts of kindness can make a difference, but lasting solutions require an entire community working together.

I also learned that the effects of homelessness can last for years. In the short term, people may struggle to find food, transportation, healthcare, or a safe place to sleep. Over time, those challenges can make it much harder to keep a job, continue an education, manage physical or mental health, and rebuild relationships. Thinking back to the mother and her two daughters my mom drove to a homeless shelter in downtown San Diego, I now understand that she was doing everything she could to keep her family together and her daughters in school. That experience means much more to me today than it did when I was ten years old.

One of the ideas that stayed with me the most came from Zapata's (2020) TED Talk. She challenged me to think differently about homelessness by asking us to reconsider how society views housing. She points out that we already provide housing assistance to many people who own homes through programs like the mortgage interest tax deduction, yet helping people who have no home at all is often debated. I had never thought about homelessness from that perspective before. Zapata also argues that stable housing should come first because it gives people the foundation they need to find a job, manage their health, take medication, and rebuild relationships. Her ideas challenged my belief that people must first solve all of their problems before receiving housing. Instead, I now believe that housing should be viewed as the starting point rather than the reward.

Although my research answered many of my questions, it also left me with new ones. I would like to learn more about which long-term programs are most successful at helping people remain permanently housed and how communities can prevent homelessness before families lose their homes. Moving forward, I believe communities should continue expanding affordable

housing while supporting programs that provide healthcare, mental health services, employment assistance, and other community resources. My experience at Fresh Start taught me that serving breakfast is important because it meets an immediate need, but my research taught me that lasting solutions require much more than a meal. They require seeing the humanity in every person and working together to build a community where everyone has the opportunity to have a safe and stable place to call home.

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