BART bathrooms reopen after two decades

TJ Johnston

Last month, public restrooms reopened in two underground BART stations after more than 20 years, having been closed after the September 11 attacks in 2001. Powell Street Station’s two public restrooms reopened on Feb. 2, while bathrooms reopened at Oakland’s 19th Street station on Feb. 25.

Advocates applauded the reopening but faulted the Bay Area wide transit agency for shutting public bathrooms in the first place, which has denied the human right to accessing water for drinking, sanitation and hygiene purposes to homeless people.

“Reopening restrooms represents a big step towards delivering the world-class transit our riders deserve,” BART Board member Bevan Dufty said in a statement last month. “I thank every individual who raised their voice to insist that bathrooms are a human right.”

John Stiefel, a water, sanitation and hygiene consultant, has examined water access issues in Africa, Asia and the Middle East for 12 years as a water, sanitation and hygiene consultant. Last year, he co-authored a report for the Coalition on Homelessness, which publishes Street Sheet. The report found that most homeless San Franciscans lack access to the United Nations’ minimum standard of 50 liters of water daily for personal use.

Stiefel says he welcomes the reopening, but that it’s unclear how much closer it will bring the City to the U.N.’s benchmark.

“The good news is that Powell Street is centrally located (for water access), and it would contribute to meeting the minimum standards,” he told Street Sheet. “But we need more data.”

As for BART’s national security rationale for closing the bathrooms, Stiefel says he doesn’t quite understand it. His work as a consultant took him to high-risk security nations, and he never saw that kind of response abroad.

“I’ve worked in fragile states and in places with high-security issues, but I’m confused on how that connection is made between 9/11 and public toilets,” he says.

Voter-approved measures, including BART’s Measure BB and the San Francisco County Transportation Authority’s Proposition K, passed in 2016, made the reopening possible. Prop. 1B, a statewide infrastructure bond that passed in 2006, also provided funding.

The amenities in Powell Street’s restrooms have improved since they were last open to the public. They are now all-gender restrooms, with LED lighting. A touchless sink is located outside of the restroom on the concourse, making it easily accessible for those who just want to wash their hands. There is also a drinking fountain and water bottle filling station.

BART says it plans to renovate restrooms at the Lake Merritt and Montgomery Street stations by the summer of 2021, and that restrooms in the Downtown Berkeley and Embarcadero stations could open in fiscal year 2023. Underground restrooms remain closed at Civic Center, 16th Street Mission and 24th Street Mission in San Francisco, as well as 12th Street in Oakland.
I’m an NYC girl. I was raised in New York City and have many great memories of growing up there. When I was in college, Sundays were always spent with friends, having brunch at some trendy spot that we had to get in line for at least two hours (if not more). After brunch, we’d go to The Angelika Film Center. We’d rarely know what we’d see. We’d just pick a movie when we got there. Those were some of the best times of my life.

When I was a child, my dad would take me to Coney Island. He’d take me to get hot dogs at Nathan’s and go on a few rides at Astroland. I loved the Wonder Wheel. My father didn’t like driving to Coney Island, and so we’d take the subway. I didn’t like taking the subway, and I hated seeing homeless people on the train. My mother liked to take a detour, of the people who were ignored (or abused) by almost everyone. My father would always try to help, whether it was by giving them a few dollars, or some food, if we had it. I learned to have compassion for others by his example, and I’m grateful. (Thank you and Rest in Peace, Dad).

Whenever I saw the homeless as a child, I never thought that I would ever be one of them. I never thought I would have no place to go. I never thought I’d worry about how I’d survive on the streets of NYC. I was wrong. I’ve suffered from depression, anxiety and a depersonalization-derealization disorder since childhood due to several traumatic events. For those who don’t know what this disorder is, it is the persistent, recurring feeling of being detached from one’s body or mental processes. It is like being an outside observer of one’s life (depersonalization) and being detached from one’s surroundings (derealization). I’ve lost many things to this disorder over the years. I’ve lost and had problems keeping friends, jobs and even intimate relationships.

In early autumn 2001, I was living in my own little apartment and I was doing well. I worked as a freelance writer, and though I was happy doing what I love, I didn’t make much money. This was a time of fear and confusion in New York City, and the country as a whole. September 11 had just taken place, and people were frightened. Being an Arab Muslim woman wasn’t something that I was ever ashamed of, but shortly after 9/11, I was asked to vacate my apartment because my landlady didn’t want any of, but shortly after 9/11, I was asked to vacate my apartment because my landlady “didn’t want any of, but shortly after 9/11, I was asked to vacate my apartment because my landlady didn’t want any of the people who had been living there, to return. I was looking for a new place to live, but I was having trouble finding anything that was affordable and safe. I finally found a small apartment and moved in.

The loss of my apartment was a shock for me. It caused me to regress and to lose control due to my disorder. I felt completely detached from what was going on around me. It’s very hard to describe this feeling to someone if they’ve never had it. I felt like I was observing someone who looked like me and whose life was falling apart. I felt nothing, just numb with no feelings of my own. Everything was happening around me, but never to me. Of course, being so detached from my own reality caused me to stop seeing the person that I’d started a relationship with. He never knew why I ended everything with him. I stopped writing, so there was no money. I stopped going to therapy because it no longer felt like it mattered. I ended up alone and homeless due to mental illness. I was one of the homeless that everyone seemed to despise and blame for their condition. People called me a drug addict and other names, even though I was none of those things. I suffered from a mental illness, but no one seemed to care or take the time to find out what was going on with me.

A couple of months after becoming homeless, a friend of my father’s, whom I hadn’t seen in many years, recognized me on the street. He knew about my mental issues from before and he made sure that I was able to get the help that I needed. I was taken to the hospital immediately. I was very dehydrated and hadn’t eaten in a while. I was stabilized while in the hospital, and I was connected with my therapist who didn’t know what had happened to me. I abruptly stopped stopping up for my appointments. I started to come back to life—slowly, but I was making progress. Eventually, I was able to get another apartment with some help from my dad’s friend and a social worker. I often wonder what would’ve happened to me if this person never noticed me that day on the street.

I now live in upstate New York, but I try to visit my mother in Brooklyn whenever I can. Even though many things have changed in New York City over the years, one thing has never changed, and that’s the ever-growing number of the homeless population. New York has approximately 8,800 homeless people, of which there’s one sheltered homeless person per 181 people. Thousands more men, women and children are sleeping on the streets, subways and other public places, many of whom suffer from mental illness.

I recently had a Zoom conversation with Alison Freer, a volunteer therapist at the Coalition for the Homeless. Alison has been volunteering for the past 23 years, not just in New York City, but also in upstate New York.

“The homeless in NYC aren’t as fortunate as the ones in upstate New York,” she said. “Being in a rural area has its advantages, because there are more resources available, and the number of homeless people isn’t nearly as high as it is in a big city like New York.”

Alison shared some facts from the coalition.

In December 2021, there were 48,691 homeless people, including 15,277 homeless children, sleeping each night in New York City’s main municipal shelter system. A near-record 18,704 single adults slept in shelters each night in December 2021.

Compared to homeless families, homeless single adults have higher rates of serious mental illness, addiction disorders and other severe health problems. Over the course of 2021, 107,530 different homeless adults and children slept in the New York City Department of Homeless Services shelter system. This includes 31,947 homeless children.

The number of homeless New Yorkers sleeping each night in municipal shelters is now 16 percent higher than it was ten years ago. The number of homeless single adults is 91 percent higher than it was ten years ago.

It has been estimated that 77 percent of adult families, 68 percent of single adults and 53 percent of families with children sleeping in shelters had at least one disability.

“City surveys and even public assistance organizations greatly underestimate the actual number of homeless men, women and children in the city,” Alison commented. “The numbers are far greater, and there are thousands of unsheltered homeless that fall through the cracks. Just forgotten about.”

As Alison spoke to me, I noticed that she shook her head often, overwhelmed by the facts in front of her. I asked Alison about her own experience with some of the mentally ill homeless people that she’s worked with.

“Many schizophrenics, but one sticks out the most in my mind: a young man named Anthony who was quite talented, an artist. He sold his paintings in the subway sometimes, and many people would look for him every day because he was so intelligent and charming when he was lucid. Then one day, he disappeared, just gone.”

“Do you know what happened to him?” I asked.

“I don’t know. We looked for him, but he just vanished. Sometimes this happens with some of the homeless that I’ve worked with, but Anthony was different, special. I like to think that he’s out there, still painting and happy, but it’s probably not the case. Many with mental illness use drugs or alcohol to cope, self-medicating. Anthony had substance abuse issues, and he’d overdosed a few times.”

Alison had tears in her eyes as she spoke, and I felt myself becoming emotional as well. I could almost see Anthony in my mind, even though I had never met him. I didn’t want to overwhelm Alison any more than I had to, so I scheduled another Zoom call with her to discuss her experience as a volunteer therapist for the homeless in New York, and how the pandemic has affected the homeless in New York City and the state as whole.

Please join me for part 2 of “Falling Through The Cracks,” coming soon. Johanna Elattar is a writer in New York. Readings of her poetry and fiction can be found on her YouTube channel, Rotten on the Vine.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCbRYYfwewHqTGUlbw_lq4

VENDOR SHEET is currently recruiting vendors to sell the newspaper around San Francisco. Vendors pick up the papers for free at our office in the Tenderloin and sell them for $2 apiece at locations across the City. You get to keep all the money they make from sales. Earn extra income while also helping elevate the voices of the homeless writers who make this paper so unique, and promoting the vision of a San Francisco where every human being has a home.

To sign up, visit our office at 280 Turk St from 10-4 on Monday-Thursday and 10-Noon on Friday.
How Housing Choice Vouchers Saved My Family

Dempsey "Sunbear" Jackson

In 2001, I was homeless and addicted to methamphetamines. That year, I found out that my girlfriend of 10 years, Amy, was pregnant with our son, Marley. We went to Jelani House, a rehabilitation program, to try to prepare for our son’s arrival. But when we showed up, the shelter wouldn’t let me bring my sleeping bag in. Instead, I had to stay on the street and try to get clean alone while taking care of our dogs, and Amy and I split up.

I was on the street when Marley was born. With help from the San Francisco Homeless Outreach Team (HOT), I was housed in a hotel in the Tenderloin. The deal was that I would stay clean and they would help me obtain housing. About the same week that Amy was getting out of transitional housing and I was timing out of my HOT team room, I got a room at the Knox Hotel. I was furious because the Vincent Hotel meant staying next door to people using drugs; I had about a year clean at the time.

Marley, Amy and I moved into the Knox Hotel, which was a much better place than the Vincent, but alas, there was drug use all around us. We maintained a clean and sober lifestyle, but we were completely distraught about what we were going to do about permanent housing. I couldn’t work because of my disability and Amy had a jobcleaning SRO hotels, so we could not afford any kind of reasonable living situation. Cohabitating with no space with my ex-girlfriend Amy and our son had us so stressed out and at each other’s throats a lot of the time, even though we really wanted to co-parent successfully.

By that time, Marley was in kindergarten and was starting to meet other kids, realizing that his situation was different from the other kids at school. One day he said to me, “Daddy, I’m not like normal children, am I?”

He said all the other kids don’t live in little rooms with their parents with bed bugs and roaches. Honestly, my heart broke right then and there! We were dealing with a horrific manager who couldn’t stand us and didn’t treat us with any respect. That, plus having to deal with our neighbors, made our home feel like a horrible place. We had to worry about sex offenders living in the same building as our child, whom we wanted so much to protect.

Exasperated, I went to the HOT team for help and advice. It must have been fate, because my old case manager told me I should go talk to Miguel at the Coalition of Homelessness. Coincidentally, Miguel had just found out about something for families living in SRO hotels called housing choice vouchers. There were only three vouchers, I think—one for living in SRO hotels called housing choice vouchers. I had just found out about something for families living in SRO hotels called housing choice vouchers.

Having a table to eat at instead of sitting on the bottom bunk, like we had to in the SRO, the space to play board games, a place just for my medications, and a place to have houseplants, which calm my PTSD and anxiety, have all contributed to my healing and helped my beautiful son grow into a kind, compassionate, empathetic guy.

In our current situation, we have been able to climb out of debt. We both have credit scores that are better than we could ever have thought possible. None of this could have been accomplished living in an 8-foot-by-10-foot room, akin to a jail cell—that’s about the same size as our kitchen is now! I can sleep soundly now that I don’t have to worry about roaches crawling into the CPAP machine that helps manage my sleep apnea.

I guess what I’m trying to say is everyone deserves a home—especially children. Broken families can come together and heal the traumas of our childhoods and not inflict them on our children. All of this has been possible thanks to the housing choice program.

I arrived in San Francisco from Anchorage, Alaska on Feb. 20, 2008. I stayed with the father of my children and my two sons. We stayed in my mother-in-law’s apartment in the Alemany projects. It was there I conceived my second son. I drank and did drugs during this time, while working for my brothers-in-law and my kids’ father through In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS). I went to jail due to domestic violence incidents between me and my partner at the time, while in alcohol and drug addiction. I also attended Heal College in 2010 while living at this apartment. I destroyed the apartment but still, my mother-in-law allowed me to stay there. The police were called so many times that the San Francisco Housing Authority evicted us. I felt so angry at myself for my part in the eviction. We left with our luggage on a cold December night not knowing where to go.

My then-partner and I ended up meeting with a couple who knew out in Bayshore. The couple took us in and we agreed we’d pay rent and buy food with our food stamps. The couple had friends who came over almost every day to smoke meth. When we arrived, the two of us were addicted to alcohol and crack cocaine, but by the time we left our house we were both addicted to meth, too. Some parents brought their kids along when they came to smoke meth. It was a trap house. I left to call the police and turn myself in, because I was so tired of what was going on in that house. I had warrants so they were able to take me in. When I was released from jail, I went back to the house to look for my partner. The couple said he left.

I went to 24th and Mission, where he had hung out.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN SELLING STREET SHEET?

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I tell them about when I played pool against Minnesota Fats. Okay, I used to be the number one pool player in San Fran I’ve been playing pool since I was 14. I’m turning 68 this won world championship poker tournaments, Texas Hold ‘Em, I’ve been playing pool since I was 14. I’m turning 68 this won world championship poker tournaments, Texas Hold ‘Em, Low Ball, Five Card Stunt, and they called me “Action Jackson”

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VENDOR PROFILE

Stanley Michael Jackson Vendor #193

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ce he was back in his twenties. I found him there to a thorough search, asking his friends and acquaintances. The two of us camped out on 24th and Mission for years until my former partner went to jail. We were living in a tent when the river flooded and we had to move to a different location. I never really felt at home in San Francisco because I like action. I used to be the number one pool player in San Francisco. Did you grow up in San Francisco? No! *laughs*

So you played against Minnesota Fats… did you win? What makes Street Sheet unique? Because I like action.

Okay, I used to be the number one pool player in San Francisco. I grew up in and out of Frisco. I was born in Oakland, CA and moved here permanently in 2000. That was when I got my first job. I still remember the day I started working at Clay House—my second home. In 2007, I got fired for selling drugs to a customer who helped when I was homeless. The voices in my head said I was messing around with my dad and I thought it was real. I followed her to her restaurant, went inside and confronted her, demanding she stay away from my son. When they arrested me, I caught another charge for putting hands on a deputy. I was convicted, they gave me three years in county jail. As released to San Francisco General Hospital, where I applied for Supplemental Security Income. I called the Housing Authority to check the status of my housing application and they said I was on the waitlist. That's why I volunteered to help the homeless.

I was diagnosed with schizophrenia and was given psych medication. In 2020, I was put under conservatorship, which means the county appointed people to make decisions for me. Christian, by the way. My solid faith in God moves mountains in my life. Not once did I blame Him for my struggle. I'm Christian, by the way. My solid faith in God moves mountains in my life. I would report me to the police because I had gone AWOL after I was mandated by the courts to go to rehab. My social worker told me to go to Psychiatric Emergency Services (PES) to start the process all over at San Francisco General Hospital. My conservator begged me to go to PES, and said that if I refused, I'd be sent back to jail. PES sent me back to the psych ward, and after a week I was sent to Hummingbird, a mental health respite center. Next I was sent to Grove Street where I went AWOL again. Every rehabilitation center I went to in San Francisco I never stayed. I just wanted to be with my partner, so I ended up at his house again. I did drugs and drank alcohol again. We fought and we had sex only when drunk and high. It was so unhealthy. I was so tired of arguing and of the voices in my head that screamed, “Get your own apartment!” so that I could do whatever I wanted. I wasn't taking my medication so I was hallucinating and getting violent with him, accusing him of cheating on me.

I ended up panhandling in the Tenderloin. One night, a woman approached me and bullied me. I didn't say anything. I mended my own business. I saw her again the next night and told her I wanted to fight her. She came back late that night—figured she was waiting for me to get high and drunk. I dropped her to the ground. She grabbed a crutch from an old man and hit me with it. I grabbed the crutch when all of a sudden a knife came out of nowhere! She stabbed my left hand. I took my bandana off and wrapped my hand with it. My partner showed up and took me home. He fixed me up with salt water and peroxide.

I got arrested again in April 2021 and spent one night in jail, then they transported me back to the psych ward at SFGH. I was happy to see my favorite nurses. I left in July for my current home at a healing center in Lompoc. I am happy to be away from San Francisco so that I can stay focused on my recovery. Away from my former partner. He's been showing me true love and giving me ultimatums to stay sober. Maintain it or he will not marry me. I love it here. I discovered my gift of writing poems and short stories, and I am also working on my autobiography.

Please pray for me that I succeed with my writing. I believe I will. It's a gift from God. I am making a difference sharing my experiences and my voice with you. I have been calling the San Francisco Housing Authority to check the status of my one-bedroom apartment every month. Last week I applied for their emergency voucher through the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing at hsh.sfgov.org/services. A screener indicated I was eligible and in February we will receive the voucher. I am planning on getting back to Clay House. I see myself succeeding at this residential area. The area is good, without liquor stores or drug activities. There are hills which are good for exercise! I plan on staying there until I get housing. It’s hard to get housing in San Francisco or anywhere when you're drunk and on drugs.

My brother, may he rest in peace and love, died from alcoholism. I am breaking the vicious cycle of alcoholism in my family. He was diagnosed with epilepsy. This tragedy opened my eyes to stop drinking for good. I am done! I have said this several times and relapsed but I am for real this time. I am dedicating my life to the Lord. God knows I'm trying. I want to live eternally. Being a Christian, refraining from sin, and living clean and sober, I will be responsible and independent to keep and maintain my housing. I take the initiative while in treatment to make phone calls, communicate with the right people, and do the footwork to make things happen in my life. It’s hard but with hard work and a desire to help myself, I know I will succeed. With God, anything is possible. I know I will get my own housing soon. I am a changed woman. I have been on the SFHA waitlist for public housing for 13 years now. I know that some people wait more than that. It’s ridiculous. That’s my story of housing status.
On February 3, the author Michael Shellenberger climbed the fence of the City’s new Tenderloin Linkage Center to try and take photos of clients seeking services there. It was an attempt to “expose” the City for providing an outdoor space that allows drug use. Overdose rates have been skyrocketing, many attributed to the availability of fentanyl, combined with the deep despair the pandemic brought to unhoused San Franciscans who have been suffering through a lack of shelter, housing, treatment and even basics like water for two years. The linkage center is the City’s attempt to give some respite from the streets and connect folks with services. The guard who knocked him off the wall knocked him off his hand, and he lunged into the center screaming. A citizens’ arrest was made by the center director, and staff called the police. Shellenberger demonstrated little respect for the privacy and dignity of those in need, the center is attempting to support, who frankly deserve an apology from him.

Shellenberger is a writer who weighs in on evidence-based discussion, often without evidence. He plays fast and loose with facts, decontextualizes the findings he presents, and flagrantly cherry-picks data. His past books have been controversial, using a formula that plays well in right-wing media. He uses a basic formula that gets him publicity in right-wing areas by identifying himself as an independent thinker who walked away from the left—then trashes scientific thinking around topics such as global warming. His latest book tour included appearances on Fox News, the Joe Rogan show, Glenn Beck and the Manhattan Institute. Despite the expert consensus that America’s homelessness crisis is primarily fueled by stagnant incomes and out of control housing costs, Shellenberger’s central thesis is that homelessness is driven by a combination of rampant substance use, mental illness and a climate of decadent moral permissiveness in liberal cities. We break down some of these illusions here.

FACT: PROGRESSIVES FIGHT FOR PERMISSIVENESS IN LIBERAL CITIES. We break down some of these illusions here.

FACT: The Housing First model has proven effective again and again.

Housing First is an approach to solving homelessness that prioritizes providing permanent housing to people experiencing homelessness, without requiring staying in shelter or transitional housing first. The idea is that by ending an individual’s homelessness, an individual is stable and able to flourish. By opposing housing first, and pushing only for more shelter beds and treatment centers, Shellenberger chooses to ignore best practices across the country from cities that have taken a hard look at all their homeless spending and readjusted, using modeling that ensures people move through the system and out of homelessness if a city overspends on shelter and invests little in prevention or housing, individuals get stuck in a cycle of going from shelter to shelter, while more and more people become homeless. By analyzing the system as a whole and making adjustments, many cities have been able to make episodes of homelessness more brief and rare. Shellenberger argues that some less liberal cities like Houston are better on homelessness. But every city Shellenberger cites as being successful, including Houston, uses a Housing First model—the model Shellenberger is saying isn’t working.

At the end of the book, after examining his central thesis—that housing does not solve homelessness—Shellenberger calls for more housing. Go figure.

FACT: San Francisco’s homeless population has risen much more slowly thanks to the expansion of shelter and housing options.

Shellenberger notes that San Francisco saw a large growth in homelessness between 2005 and 2019. But he fails to mention that we saw minimal growth in municipal homelessness between 2016 and 2019, compared to other West Coast cities like Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland and Bay Area counties like Santa Clara and Alameda saw 10% to 20% growth between every biennial count. This is because our City expanded to use its shelters and permanent supportive housing investments, while other municipalities did not.

FACT: Rising rents explain the rise in homelessness in major cities.

Shellenberger also fails to cite studies that looked at why West Coast rates of homelessness have risen and found no other contributing factor except rising rents. Shellenberger’s argument relies on a Zillow study that he blazently misrepresents, wrongly interpreting the study as demonstrating that affordability doesn’t matter. The study in fact found that rent affordability explained significant differences in homelessness rates in different geographic areas. With the exception of the Miami metropolitan area, all of the cities Shellenberger mentions as counterpoints to the West Coast experience score fairly well on Zillow’s rent affordability index. So even though average rents in those cities have been rising in absolute terms, the households are not paying a significant share of income where Zillow’s model predicts they would be associated with rapid increases in homelessness. However, on the west coast, and in particular San Francisco, already inflated rents rose even higher, sending struggling households into homelessness.

FACT: Criminalization exacerbates poverty and does nothing to move people out of homelessness.

Shellenberger claims SF does not criminalize homelessness, and that by focusing on housing homeless people San Francisco has driven up homeless rates. In fact, police issue between 10,000 and 20,000 citations to homeless people each year, according to numbers released over the past many decades by the Superior Court, and according to the San Francisco Department of Emergency Management, operations occur daily to remove unhoused people from public spaces with police present.

Shellenberger interviewed several experts about criminalization, including Christopher Herrin of Harvard. Herrin is cited and even indexed in Shellenberger’s book across more than a half-dozen pages. Yet he never once cites any of Herrin’s peer-reviewed articles in top social science journals about how San Francisco has actually increased the number of officers addressing homelessness between 2015 and 2020 and intensified policing during this time. Nor does he review all the negative impacts of this criminalization found by numerous other social scientists and criminologists cited in that work.

FACT: Only 6% of San Francisco’s budget is spent on solutions to homelessness.

Shellenberger claims that San Francisco spends an exorbitant amount of money on homelessness, but never acknowledges that our “Homeless Budget” primarily comprises spending on permanent supportive housing. He fails to mention that even though homelessness has been a major issue in San Francisco for decades, only 3% of the City budget went towards ending homelessness, which increased to 6% annually when Prop. C was implemented.

In the book, he argues that the $350 million San Francisco spends annually on shelters and emergency services was wasted, when in fact according to Jeff Kositsky, former Director of the Department of Homelessness and Supportive Housing as quoted in a January 10, 2022 interview on KALW, a large portion of the department’s budget goes toward supportive housing for over 8,000 households who would otherwise be homeless, costing the government many times more in increased health care and social service costs. Shellenberger also distort the per-person cost of homeless spending by failing to accurately reflect how many people experience homelessness each year in San Francisco. Shellenberger relies on the PIT count number, which is notoriously a dramatic underestimate, and thus erroneously inflates the per person spending.

FACT: Similar to other municipalities, more than 70% of homeless people in San Francisco became homeless when they lost their housing here in the City.
Shellenberger claims that San Francisco is a unique magnet of homeless people, wrongly taking the point-in-time count survey that finds that 30% of those experiencing homelessness are from outside the City out of context. Surveys from other West Coast counties such as Washington’s King County and California’s Los Angeles, Fresno and Kern counties also show that 20% to 40% of people experiencing homelessness say they became homeless outside that city. Shellenberger conveniently ignores this in his book.

In fact, SF is a leading exporter of poor people due to rising rents and real estate speculation. Not only does San Francisco bus hundreds of homeless people out of town every year, but Black and brown low-income community members have been displaced out of San Francisco in large numbers, while many more have ended up homeless.

**FACT: Making sobriety a prerequisite for accessing services weakens our ability to transition people out of homelessness.**

Shellenberger argues that Housing First doesn’t work because some studies found that the addiction rates of those who receive housing compared with those who remain in shelters are not significantly different. He doesn’t deny that Housing First has been shown to successfully end homelessness, reduce jail time and reduce costs to other public services, he just argues that we should be using this housing exclusively as a reward for those who will go sober. What he ignores are the findings from studies that demonstrate that there is little difference in outcomes from those who entered treatment before entering housing and those entering housing directly from the streets, except the latter saves public funds.

Shellenberger focuses on studies with people who voluntarily opted into sober living residential rehab programs that worked for them (SF also has these programs that have shown success). What he ignores—and what the Coalition on Homelessness found in our 2020 report, Stop the Revolving Door, is that over one-third of those who complete residential rehab programs end up back on the street, and that many of those who return to the streets eventually relapse or are being unable to maintain their recovery due to a lack of housing. Less than 20% had stable housing after leaving treatment.

Shellenberger ignores countless studies that show that access to housing decreases substance use and improves mental health, including a recent UC San Francisco study that looked at shelter-in-place hotel carrying out these efforts.

**FACT: Homeless people are not all struggling with substance use or mental illness.**

Shellenberger contends that the vast majority of those experiencing homelessness in San Francisco are both drug addicted and mentally ill. But many studies show this is not the case. According to the 2009 Point In Time (PIT) count, about 42% of homeless San Franciscans say they struggle with substance use. It is important to note that the PIT count dramatically undercounts families with children, and other unhoused people whose housing status is not obvious at first glance, which may suggest that an even larger proportion of unhoused San Franciscans are not struggling with these issues. Shellenberger also fails to account for the many people who have substance use and mental health issues as a result—not as a cause—of homelessness. According to the 2009 PIT count, alcohol or drug use was the primary cause of homelessness for 36% of those counted, while mental health issues accounted for just 8%. This is key: It points to the need to ramp up homeless prevention efforts—something that does not fit into his lack of personal responsibility narrative. Shellenberger also extensively criticizes Prop. C, which is funding the first significant expansion of treatment, and prevention for these challenges in more than five decades, while calling for more mental health and substance use treatment.

**FACT: San Francisco shelters a greater proportion of its homeless population than almost any other city on the West Coast.**

Shellenberger claims San Francisco has a super high rate of unsheltered homelessness compared to other cities. This is true when compared to New York City, Denver, Phoenix, and Miami. But Shellenberger chooses to ignore that San Francisco has a higher rate of sheltered homeless people compared to every one of California’s major cities except San Diego. Given similar levels of rising rents along the west coast, it is an important comparison.
DIVISION STREET
AN UPCOMING PHOTO BOOK BY ROBERT GUMPER

During the 2016 Super Bowl, held in San Francisco, the unhoused were “urged” to move to the ironically named Division Street, where they would be, city officers hoped, “invisible”.

Amid the unlimited wealth and consumption of that “super” week, the unhoused went about their lives, crowded together in their tents or sleeping rough on the ground. There were no facilities, no promise of permanent housing. Division Street is where this project began and from which it gets its name.

From the late 1930s until the 1960s, San Francisco was a center of “community modernism” with well-paid working-class union jobs, city programs, affordable housing, clean streets, and a diverse, vibrant social and economic culture.

“Community modernism” has given way to “corporate modernism” where property signifies worth and status. Public housing and affordable rents are considered breeding grounds for crime and laziness, the tenants undesirable.

The voices of the unhoused and others are integral to this project. First-person storytelling, messages left on the street and on neighborhood listservs, media headlines and politicians’ characterizations make “Division Street” a collaboration between many communities.

“Division Street,” in photos and words, has become a metaphor for the “division” of communities, between the wealthy few and the expendability of the many, in San Francisco, in the U.S. and the world.

Find more at www.robertgumpert.com Division Street, the book, can be ordered from Dewi Lewis Publishing: dewilewis.com/products/division-street

STREET SPEAK
EPISODE 11:
POETS SPEAK

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