No Place to Call Home

Homelessness Policy in San Joaquin County

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Executive Summary

The State of California faces a growing homelessness crisis that is straining communities, public resources, and social services across the state. Despite the allocation of substantial funding and support, the crisis continues to intensify. San Joaquin County has been especially impacted by this crisis, having a precipitous rise in homelessness, with unsheltered individuals comprising a majority share of that increase. As the State increasingly shifts public policy responsibilities down to the local government level, disparities in the size of homelessness populations have become more pronounced across the state. This offers an opportunity to examine what policies counties can adopt that have the potential to help address this growing homelessness issue. The purpose of this paper is to examine the potential effectiveness and administrability of different homelessness policies that San Joaquin County could implement in order to address its burgeoning homelessness crisis.

This paper begins by providing the various definitions of homelessness and outlines why different organizations adopt and utilize specific definitions. It also clarifies the distinction between sheltered and unsheltered individuals. These definitions are essential for understanding how the Point-in-Time Count is conducted and how it generates the latest numbers on the size of the overall homeless population within San Joaquin County, as well as the sizes of the sheltered and unsheltered subgroups.

Following the discussion of definitions and Point-in-Time Count data, this paper reviews existing literature on the primary drivers of homelessness, including lack of affordable housing options, mental health challenges, poverty and economic instability, and the proliferation of drugs and substance abuse. Building on this foundation, the paper then explores policy responses to these issues, grouping these solutions into four broad categories: prevention and early

intervention programs, temporary shelters, transitional housing, and affordable housing development. Within this framework, the paper takes a closer look at three specific policy approaches: tiny homes, universal basic income (UBI), and safe parking and camping sites, and their potential for implementation in San Joaquin County as part of a strategy to address the homelessness crisis.

This paper concludes with policy recommendations for San Joaquin County policy makers grounded in the in-depth literature review of homelessness policy solutions. Recommendations include designating a portion of the newly purchased Oakmoore Golf Course property for the immediate establishment of a safe parking and camping site, leveraging existing infrastructure to better serve the county's unsheltered population. Additionally, the county should direct the Human Services Agency and Community Development Department to conduct a technical analysis feasibility study for a tiny home village. This analysis should assess projected costs, identify potential sites, and outline multiple design and funding options to ensure implementation in the near future. Together, these policy recommendations have the potential to augment the San Joaquin County's current homelessness strategy and provide policymakers a practical, phased approach to addressing their homelessness crisis.

Section I: Introduction

Overview

On any given night in the State of California, nearly two hundred thousand people sleep in a shelter or on the street (Kendall, 2024). Just over five years after Governor Gavin Newsom bravely pronounced in his 2020 State of the State address that, "I don't *think* homelessness can be solved – I *know* homelessness can be solved" (State of California, 2020, emphasis added), the homeless population continues to rise dramatically in the United States' wealthiest and most populous state. The thousands of circulating pictures and videos of vast encampments help illustrate the dire situations that these individuals and society at large, face (Rocha, 2024; Williams, 2024). And perhaps nowhere in California, is this crisis more visible and acute than on the streets of San Joaquin County.

Just a stone's throw away from affluent Silicon Valley and less than fifty miles away from the state's capital in Sacramento, San Joaquin County is among the fastest growing regions in California, home to the state's most rapidly expanding city, Lathrop (Painter, 2024). It also boasts one of the most diverse populations in the United States, with Stockton, its county seat, ranked as the nation's most racially diverse city (U.S. News & World Report, 2020). Yet it also has the fastest growing homeless population in the State of California from 2022 to 2024, with its numbers more than doubling in just those two years alone and its unsheltered population growing by approximately 155% in the same timespan (San Joaquin County Continuum of Care, 2024). The county's unique geographic, demographic, and economic characteristics make it a compelling case study in how county leaders and local policymakers address the challenges of a homelessness crisis.

Homelessness: Terms Defined

Officials and agencies define and classify homelessness in various ways, typically depending on the specific nature of their work, the populations they serve, and the overall mission of their organization. One of the key definitions commonly referenced in the existing literature is derived from the 1987 McKinney-Vento Act, which has undergone several amendments and revisions over time. According to the act, homelessness is defined as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate night residence" (National Center for Homeless Education, n.d.). This definition includes any person (child, youth, or adult) who is living in a motel, hotel, trailer park, camping ground, car, park, shelter, or sharing housing with others, due to loss of housing or economic hardship (National Center for Homeless Education, n.d.). This expansive characterization provides a broad and inclusive framework which captures the diverse socio-economic experiences of homelessness, which has adapted to the ever changing social and economic conditions of society.

Notably, as amendments to the McKinney-Vento Act have expanded legal protections for homeless individuals, this definition lends itself better to a legal framework for protecting children, youth, and adults at different rungs of the social-economic ladder than it does in procuring a feasible and accurate count of those who are sheltered or unsheltered. Therefore, continuums of care use the HUD definition of homelessness for their point-in-time (PIT) counts. This definition includes individuals or families living in supervised publicly or privately operated shelters which provide temporary living arrangements and assistance, or those whose primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not ordinarily designed as a regular sleeping accommodation (San Joaquin Continuum of Care, 2024). This approach is designed for a narrower, more observable subset of the homeless population which can more easily be

identified by those street-level workers who conduct the count on a biennial basis, specifically, the unsheltered and chronically homeless, which HUD can track and support with targeted services and housing interventions. It can be challenging for PIT counters to identify individuals who are temporarily staying with relatives or friends, paying out of pocket for a motel, living involuntarily in trailer parks, or 'couch surfing', therefore the more expansive definition used by the McKinney-Vento Act is unrealistic for their use.

Additionally, the definition used by HUD and utilized in the PIT count categorizes homeless individuals into two distinct groups, 'sheltered' and 'unsheltered'. The term 'sheltered' refers to individuals or families that are staying in temporary or emergency accommodations provided by either private or public homeless assistance programs. 'Unsheltered' refers to individuals living in places not meant for human habitation. This includes streets, parks, abandoned buildings, encampments, or vehicles.

Point-In-Time Count

In January 2024, California's forty-four continuums of care (CoC) conducted their required Housing and Urban Development (HUD) biennial point-in-time (PIT) count. A CoC is a regional or local planning body responsible for coordinating housing and supportive services to help homeless individuals transition into stable, permanent housing (HUD Exchange, n.d.a). They are also responsible for carrying out the PIT count and although an imperfect measure, this count is the primary way that officials seek to determine the number of individuals who are homeless at that specified time in a given area, much like a snapshot (HUD Exchange, n.d.b). Each CoC employs volunteers who physically count as many sheltered and unsheltered individuals within their jurisdiction on a single day. In January of 2024, the PIT count determined that California as a whole saw an expansion in its homeless population by 8%,

increasing from 172,000 in 2022, to the current number of 187,000 (HUD Exchange, 2022; HUD Exchange, 2024b). Although the statewide increase was 8%, the numbers from each of the forty-four continuums of care revealed unique results and situations that shed light on the complexities of this growing issue.

For instance, Sacramento County saw a decrease in its homeless population, dropping almost 29% from 9,278 individuals in 2022 to 6,615 in 2024 (Sacramento Steps Forward, 2024). Alameda County also saw a drop in their homeless population, although it was a much more modest 3% (EveryOneHome, 2024). Other counties, such as Sonoma, did not fare as well; their homeless population grew by 11% (Sonoma County Continuum of Care, 2024). However, these counties' close neighbor to the south, San Joaquin County, saw its homeless population increase from 2,319 individuals in 2022 to 4,732 in 2024, which is a 104% increase. (San Joaquin Continuum of Care, 2024). This is a staggering increase considering the population of San Joaquin County only grew about 1.3% annually in those two years (SJC Data Compass, 2024).

Although California's homeless population also grew, the extensive percentage difference means that San Joaquin County isn't just mirroring the state at large, it is by leaps and bounds much worse, and increasingly so. This surge has placed immense strains on local public social services, law enforcement, public health, as well as community wellbeing and cohesion (Amoroso-Pohl et al. 2023, pg. 4).

The disparities in the PIT counts across counties provides an opportunity to explore and examine the interventions that some counties have adopted and consider their potential effectiveness if implemented in San Joaquin County, given the current conditions on the ground. California itself does have a statewide trend of growth in its homeless population which would naturally affect each county. However, the divergent results from the many point-in-time counts

prove that counties themselves can be the impetus of positive change, as evidenced by some nine counties that saw a drop in their homelessness populations from 2022 to 2024 (Kendall, 2024).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section II presents the literature review divided into two parts. The first part explores the primary drivers of homelessness and examines the devolution of public policy to the local level, establishing a foundation for identifying county level policy responses. The second part reviews a range of policy alternatives, organized into broad categories according to their methods of intervention, and synthesizes the existing research on each. This section also delves deeper into the literature and the implementation history of three specific policy solutions San Joaquin County could adopt to address homelessness, particularly among the unsheltered population. Section III applies these three solutions to the San Joaquin County context, evaluating their feasibility, administrative requirements, and potential for success. Finally, Section IV concludes with a brief discussion and offers recommendations for San Joaquin County policymakers as they consider the county's next steps in addressing homelessness.

Section II: Literature Review

Homelessness is a national issue that has progressively gotten worse, culminating in 2024 with over 770,000 individuals counted and categorized as homeless by Housing and Urban Development (HUD) (HUD Exchange, 2024a). However, California seems to be at the epicenter of this homeless epidemic, although California accounts for only about 12% of the national population, it has almost 30% of the entire country's homeless population (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2022). Homelessness in California is a holistic issue driven by interconnected political, social, and economic components. While there are many contributing factors, a review of the existing research literature suggests that four primary drivers are the high

cost of housing and the lack of affordable housing options; mental health challenges; poverty and economic instability; and the proliferation of drugs and substance abuse. In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate on each in turn.

Housing Costs and Development Restrictions

A long history of high and ever-increasing housing costs has plagued California. California is the second most expensive housing market in the United States, second only to Hawaii, which has a major geographic component to their high costs (DePietro, 2022). The California Legislative Analysist's Office (LAO) has documented the drivers including high building costs, high land cost with low density building, and building less housing than people demand (Taylor, 2015). Building costs are expensive because California has high labor costs, which can be 20% higher than national averages, high material costs, and governmental fees remain some of the most burdensome in the United States (Taylor, 2015, pg. 13-14).

New housing development is being systematically delayed or restricted throughout California, and is especially pronounced in coastal areas. This issue is partially derived from; community resistance to new development. This resistance leverages local land use authority, through the lengthy and often burdensome review process required by the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and local jurisdictions prioritizing non-residential development due to incentives built into California's current tax system (Taylor, 2015, pg. 15). These tactics are often employed by communities and local governments wary of new development, a phenomenon commonly referred to as NIMBYism (Not in My Backyard). This sentiment often stems from perceived or potential downsides to local communities in the form of, loss of neighborhood character, decrease in property values for long term residents, and

concerns about the strain on current infrastructure or the uncertainty about the expansion of infrastructure that come with increases in population (Taylor, 2015, pg. 16).

These two issues of high housing costs and restricting development, ultimately contribute to the problem of the growing gap between housing supply and demand. California is facing unprecedented shortages of affordable housing, with the Public Policy Institute of California reporting that there are now 2.93 Californians for every occupied housing unit (McGhee et al., 2021).

Mental Health, Poverty, and Instability

Mental health challenges are not new to California policy makers, but policy interventions from the past may have exacerbated outcomes today. In 1967, the California State Legislature passed, nearly unanimously, the Lanterman-Petris-Short Act. This act was a major contributor to a multi-year policy push to close California state mental facilities, and to pass the burden of caring for the mentally ill to the various counties. Additionally, the act ensured that the mentally ill had civil protections greater than they did before, making it difficult to force anyone to receive unwanted help (Jeffe, 1987). Ronald Reagan, California Governor at the time, signed the act into law, because it was billed to his conservative sensibilities as a cost saving mechanism for the state, while liberals and the ACLU overwhelmingly supported it, because they saw community-based healthcare as a civil rights matter (Jeffe, 1987). The counties in California had neither the infrastructure nor the funding to deal with the mental health crisis facing California, as a result many mentally ill persons who would have normally been within an institution, find themselves on the street, because mental illness can be a powerful risk factor for homelessness (Tsai & Rosenheck, 2015).

Although mental illness is a predictor of homelessness it is also a symptom of homelessness (Padgett, 2020). The two-way connection between mental health and homelessness has been studied extensively and has found that although a large segment of the homeless population had mental health issues prior to becoming homeless, even more develop mental health problems on the street (Kushel et al, 2023; Padgett, 2020; Schanzer et al 2007). The trauma, stress, exploitation, violence, and overall lack of safety and security, take their toll on both the physical and mental health of homeless individuals (Kushel et al, pg. 25-26, Wusinich et al, 2019), with some striking statistics. Eighty-two percent of homeless individuals have reported a serious mental health condition during some period of their lives (Kushel et al., 2023, pg. 5), while evidence suggests that around half of homeless individuals have traumatic brain injury (TBI), compared to 12% of the general population, and 22.5% of homeless individuals have moderate to severe TBI (Stubbs et al, pg. e22-e23). The unsheltered fare worse than their sheltered counterparts, with higher levels of chronic mental illness, which in turn exacerbates chronic homelessness in a brutal cycle (Hwang, 2001; Richards & Kuhn, 2023).

Poverty and economic instability are affecting more Californians, and the issue is just continuing to grow. According to the United Ways of California's "The Real Cost Measure in California 2023", 34% of Californians do not earn a sufficient income to meet their basic needs (2023). And despite the fact that California is the United States' largest producer of agricultural products (Scott, 2024), over 23% of Californians experience food insecurity (Schanzenbach & Tomeh, 2020). Additionally, 5.5 million California households, or almost 42% of the total households in California are cost-burdened, which means they spend 30% or more of their income on housing costs (USA FACTS, 2024). Lastly, 15 million Californians, or nearly 40% of the entire population of the state, qualify for Medi-Cal (Paci & Newman, 2024), which is

provided for low-income earners. Coupled with sparse affordable housing options, and rising rents, economic instability in California continues to trend up, and trending up economic instability means trending up homelessness, because economic instability is a predictor of homelessness (Kushel, et al., 2023, pg. 36-39).

Substance Abuse

Drug use and proliferation, and alcohol abuse have long been an issue within the homeless community, and the prevalence of drug use among them has consistently been higher than those who are not homeless (Mosel, 2025). But similarly to the mental health crisis among homeless individuals, the casual arrow between drug use and homelessness works both ways (Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008; Kushel, et al., 2023 pg. 43; Mosel, 2025). Many homeless individuals develop substance abuse issues as a way to cope with the harsh realities of homelessness (Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008; Mosel, 2025; Wusinich et al. 2019). And like mental health issues, those that are unsheltered and/or are chronically homeless, suffer more from substance abuse issues (Hwang, 2001; Richards & Kuhn, 2023).

Preliminary studies suggest 1/3 of homeless individuals have substance abuse issues, and 2/3 of them have had lifelong substance abuse issues, which suggests at least 22% of the homeless population had substance abuse issues before becoming homeless (Mosel, 2025). Other literature agrees on the 1/3 of homeless individuals having substance abuse issues, but indicates that only 1/3 of those, or 11% of the overall homeless population, had substance abuse issues before they became homeless (Johnson & Chamberlain, 2008). These conflicting studies suggest that more research is needed on this topic to come to any definitive conclusions.

Policy Solutions

One aspect that these primary drivers have in common is that the policymaking authority to address these growing issues has been naturally over time delegated down to the county and local levels. This is a growing trend within the field of California public administration, and it is called 'devolution'.

Devolution is the localization of public policy. In short, devolution is when public policy power and responsibility gets shifted to a lower governmental, non-profit, or for-profit entity. Donald Kettl highlights welfare as the main example of this process; "Welfare reform marks the maturation of a generation long trend that fundamentally transformed community governance" (Kettl, 2000). Yet public safety, mental health services, and general assistance are all following suit in California. All of these public policy areas are now predominately under the purview of county governments and other local organizations that they have partnered with. Devolution is part of the reason why there are such disparate results among the different California counties. Because there are so many different policy areas that the counties govern over, there are many different tools and policies that they can implement to deal with the homelessness crisis. This paper will focus on evaluating the feasibility of three policy solutions that San Joaquin County could implement, provided that the necessary conditions are present.

Since homelessness is a complex holistic issue influenced by a variety of factors, scholars have extensively studied a wide range of policy interventions aimed at reducing the number of homeless individuals. Much of the literature broadly groups these various policies together in different policy sections. Four policy categories that are pertinent for this paper are prevention

and early intervention programs, temporary shelters, transitional housing, and affordable housing development.

The category of prevention and early intervention programs, include policies such as eviction prevention programs, rental assistance and housing vouchers, and universal basic income (UBI). This category includes policies aimed at tackling the root causes of homelessness and preventing it before it begins. Having a pending eviction is a powerful predictor of homelessness; research from Chicago suggests that individuals who needed eviction assistance and received it were 76% less likely to enter a homeless shelter within the following six months, compared to those who were in need of assistance, and did not receive it (Shinn & Cohen, 2019). Yet eviction prevention programs, while valuable, may offer only temporary relief if not paired with additional forms of support, ultimately just delaying the risk of eviction (Acosta et al., 2020).

In contrast, rental assistance and housing voucher programs provide more sustained support. These initiatives typically require participants to contribute a portion of their income toward rent, with the remaining balance subsidized (Ellen, 2020). However, a significant limitation of voucher programs can be access: for example, one study showed that nearly 30% of recipients were unable to secure housing despite having a voucher (Ellen, 2020), highlighting a disconnect between available support and actual access to housing. UBI has shown the ability to increase housing stability among participants of their programs (Hamilton & Mulvale, 2019), but incur high costs that may not be realistically feasible for municipalities' budgets (Greenstein, 2019). Research indicates that these policies can be effective in preventing elevated rates of homelessness, however, they come with significant costs, and the literature offers limited

evidence of their effectiveness for individuals who are already homeless especially the chronically homeless (Erin et al., 2020; Kerman, 2021; Toros et al., 2019).

The category of temporary shelters include polices such as emergency shelters and safe camping/parking sites. Emergency shelters strength lie in the fact that they can provide immediate support for those who are unsheltered and chronically homeless, while connecting these individuals with additional resources (Lewis e. al., 2024; Record, 2025; United States Interagency Council on Homelessness, 2016). Yet, some research indicates that emergency shelters often lack privacy, may promoted the spread of disease, and that violence is often a concern for the homeless that utilize the facilities (Daiski, 2007). Safe parking/camping sites provide a more affordable, faster, and a safer alternative to living on the streets, offering essential amenities such as showers and toilets (Broadus, 2023). Other research suggest finds areas for safe parking/camping sites can be difficult and that many sites are limited in the number of individuals that they can serve (Lewis et al. 2024). Overall, the costs for these policies vary widely. Safe parking/camping programs are relatively low-cost, while emergency shelters, despite being among the most commonly used interventions, are significantly more costly, yet still less expensive than transitional or permanent supportive housing (Culhane & Meraux 2008; Jackson et al., 2020).

The category of transitional housing interventions includes adaptive reuse of buildings, long-term recovery programs, and tiny home villages. These types of policies have a longer time horizon than the temporary shelter programs, typically up to 24 months, and generally have more services for individuals staying in the facilities meaning they are more effective than emergency shelters at addressing chronic homelessness (Jackson et al., 2020; HUD Exchange, n.d.c).

Adaptive reuse involves repurposing existing buildings to provide housing for homeless individuals. This approach has been linked to environmental and social sustainability benefits but also presents certain challenges; if these building are designated for homelessness services, they generally carry some state of disrepair, requiring significant renovation before they can be safely and effectively used (Pablo & London, 2000). This may be subsiding, since the COVID-19 pandemic has shifted the traditional use of office building, leaving more spaces potentially available for repurposing (Walk-Morris, 2021). Long-term recovery programs offer stable housing over extended periods, which plays an important role in supporting individuals' recovery from substance abuse (Prescott, n.d.) Tiny home villages strength lies in the fact that they are quick and easy to build, and provide more privacy than traditional shelters can accommodate (Kilman, 2016). Drawbacks, include the fact that there are prohibitive upfront costs, long building and renovation times, some community backlash, and limited space (Garcia & Kwan, 2021; Jackson et al., 2020; Perez, 2024).

The category of affordable housing development interventions includes reducing housing regulations and fees, inclusionary zoning, and low-income housing communities. This is a broad category that focuses on both homelessness prevention and homelessness intervention. The lack of affordable housing is one of largest drivers of homelessness (Bailey et al., 2025; Batko & Reynolds, 2023; Cygler, 2024; National Alliance to End Homelessness n.d.). Research has shown a negative association between the availability of affordable housing and the size of the homeless population (Carter, 2011). These policies are designed to increase housing accessibility. Excessive regulations and fees imposed on the building a house can add as much as 23.8% to the final cost (Emrath, 2021), creating significant barriers to the housing supply. Inclusionary zoning and low-income housing development programs aim to force or incentivize

developers to create more affordable housing, as rising housing prices have been positively linked to increases in the homeless population (Carter, 2011). Yet some of the literature suggests that affordable housing interventions are not generally popular among citizens, especially residents within the affected community; as a result, zoning changes are difficult (Harvard Law Review, 2022; Furman Center: The Center for Housing Policy). Additionally, despite paradoxical nature of the name, affordable housing is quite expensive, leaving developers unwilling to build additional units, limiting the already low supply (Christopher, 2023; Urban Institute n.d.).

Due to the significant number of various policy interventions mentioned a comprehensive comparison of all the possible solutions would be beyond the scope of this paper. Furthermore, San Joaquin County has already implemented many of these policies in one form or another, with limited success to date. Therefore, exploring policy alternatives that have yet to be instituted in San Joaquin County will be the basis of analysis. The next part of this paper will focus on three specific policy solutions that San Joaquin County can implement. The three policies are tiny homes, universal basic income, and safe camping/parking.

These three policies have been implemented or tested at various levels of government, each yielding varying degrees of success. The following section examines the history of these policy interventions, to establish a foundation for how San Joaquin County might effectively adapt and apply them within its own jurisdiction. The objective is to assess which policy, or combination of policies, offers San Joaquin County the greatest potential for feasible implementation and meaningful impact in reducing the county's persistently high homelessness rates.

Tiny Homes

There is no formal definition of a tiny home, but many proponents consider any dwelling under 400 square feet to fall within the category of 'tiny' (Evans, 2018). The average size of a tiny home utilized to housed homeless individuals is 205 Square feet (Evans, 2020). Advocates of tiny homes point out that tiny homes are quick to build, relatively affordable, and have more privacy for those who utilize the facilities than traditional emergency shelters (Kilman, 2016; Lee, 2019; Turner, 2017). Tiny homes give individuals, and in some cases couples, their own living space outside of a congregate setting. The literature has a broad consensus which emphasizes this feature as a key benefit, highlighting how it restores dignity and enhances privacy for those experiencing homelessness (Calhoun, et al, 2022; Kuang, 2023; Margier. 2023). However, there is not clear unanimity in the existing literature regarding the speed at which tiny homes can be built and utilized, and the cost to building and maintaining them. The literature gives a broad range with the costs associated with building tiny homes, with the average being about $21,000 with the extremes spanning from $1,200 (Los Angeles) to $190,632 (Sonoma County) (A-Mark Foundation, 2023; Evans, 2020). These figures, however, do not include the extra costs of property acquisition, getting utilities connected to the units, infrastructure around the units, or for services.

The use of tiny homes as a response to homelessness picked up steam in the 1990s and early 2000s, with the first formal use of tiny homes to address the growing homelessness crisis, being in 2000 with Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon (Calhoun, et al., 2022). Since 2000, tiny homes have become a popular response by policy makers for dealing with their homelessness issues. By 2020, there was at least 115 tiny home villages across the United States that were

open and housing individuals (Evans, 2024). This expansive growth of tiny villages is more pronounced on the west coast, where jurisdictions have embraced their use as a part of their effort to combat homelessness (Evans, 2020).

Many jurisdictions in California have dedicated many resources to developing, building, and utilizing tiny home villages to address their homelessness crisis. Sacramento County has opened multiple sites within the last few years, although they took years to open after initial approval (Nichols, 2023), the City of San Jose is currently working on its seventh operational site (Chu, 2025), all while Los Angeles County in partnership with multiple cities and non-profits within the area have made tiny villages a focal point in their efforts to address their homelessness issues (Homeless Initiative, 2022; Hope the Mission, 2025; Studebaker, 2022). All of these jurisdictions have opened these villages with in the last few years, so no systematic research was able to be found on the casual effects these villages have had on reducing homelessness or unsheltered populations. However, recent statistics appear promising: Sacramento saw their homelessness population drop an impressive 29% overall, with their unsheltered count dropping 41% from 2022-2024 (Sacramento Steps Forward, 2024). San Jose saw more modest drops in 2023, with their homelessness numbers shrinking by 4.7%, which was a greater decrease than Santa Clara County which saw a reduction in their overall numbers by 1.2% (County of Santa Clara, 2023). Finally, Los Angeles County saw a slight decrease in the homelessness numbers, only 0.27%, however the City of Los Angeles, where the concentration of tiny home villages in the area is located, saw a greater drop of 2.2% (County of Los Angeles Homeless Initiative, 2024). More research is needed on these projects to see if they have contributed to the success of lowering homelessness and unsheltered numbers.

Not all endeavors into tiny homes have correlated with successful outcomes. San Diego County and its city partners have had issues with the vision and progress of their tiny home village policy. Currently only one tiny home village is operational, yet the Chula Vista Village at Otay is offering limited services, no daytime access, and is at times less than a third full (City of Chula Vista, 2025; Gray, 2023). With the failure of this village, San Diego County moved off of a plan to build another village in East County (Nelson, 2024), and subsequently losing state funding soon after (White, 2024). This failure may be attributed to NIMBYism (Nelson, 2024) or another structural failure, but either way, tiny home policy will need to overcome such obstacles to be successful. In total, more research on tiny homes will be needed in the future to bolster the positive results demonstrated in some jurisdictions (Calhoun, et al., 2022).

Universal Basic Income (UBI)

Universal Basic Income (UBI) takes on a distinct form depending on the context of the environment in which it is adopted. Yet at a basic level there are generally five defining characteristics of UBI, those being that payments are in cash, they are individual, periodic, universal, and unconditional (Bidadanure, 2019). In short, these are universal payments to all citizens which are substantial enough to meet a certain level of economic wellbeing and security. Although UBI has a long rich theoretical history, its use in policy discourse and practice only gained prominence relatively recently with the rise of pilot programs in the 1960s and 70s, subsequently gaining more traction in the last decade with newer policy interventions (Kerman, 2021). The pilot programs in the 1960s and 70s were sponsored by the federal government, but took place at the state and city level, in an effort to learn about the implications of a basic income (Munnell, 1986). These programs took the form of a negative income tax (NIT), which is a

reverse tax, where the government pays individuals a percentage of the difference between their income and an income tax cutoff (Friedman, 2002, pg. 191-194). The results of the experiments found benefits for participants social welfare; health outcomes, children's academic achievements, and a decrease in offending and substance-use crimes (Kerman, 2021; Marinescu, 2018). One downside was a small to moderate reductions in work effort (Munnell, 1986).

Since the introduction of these pilot programs, a proliferation of UBI programs have been instituted around the world. These programs have generated a range of outcomes with significant implications for addressing homelessness. Multiple UBI interventions, from Finland to the United States, have demonstrated positive mental health outcomes for participants (Wilson & McDaid, 2021; Kangas, 2019). These improvements are largely attributed to increased financial stability and reduced stress related to economic insecurity (Kerman, 2021). UBI has also been associated with better physical health outcomes. One study reported an 8.5% decrease in hospital visits among participants (Marinescu, 2018), while other research observed improvements in infant and child health. (Fleischer & Hemel, 2020; Kerman, 2021). Adults also experienced enhanced general physical health, linked to better sleep quality, improved mental well-being, and increased food security (Kerman, 2021; Wilson & McDaid, 2021). Additionally, UBI programs have shown promise in improving housing stability (Hamilton & Mulvale, 2019). In an Ontario, Canada study, 58.5% of participants in their NIT pilot program reported improvements in their housing stability, an outcome directly tied to the homelessness issue (Basic Income Canada Network, 2019).

Most UBI programs rarely meet all five criteria to be considered UBI. Because of the nature of pilot programs, political opposition, and insufficient funding, universality cannot be

achieved, and indeed most of the prominent UBI programs fail to meet this criterion (Breathe: Los Angeles County, 2024; City of Mountain View, n.d.; SEED, 2021). Permanence is another characteristic that is not intrinsically encapsulated within pilot programs, given its needed time constraints for study. These programs do, however, comprise most of the needed components, and more importantly, they capture the spirit and essence of the UBI concept. Moreover, these pilot programs present some preliminary data on the likelihood that UBI can combat one of the primary drivers of homelessness, that being poverty and economic instability.

Within the context of homelessness policy, UBI is a preventative and early intervention policy which aims at stopping the crisis before it starts, by directly attempting to combat and reduce a major driver of homelessness, poverty (Clarke, 2023; Erin et al., 2020). If an individual receives a basic income that supports covers their essential human needs, like food and housing, then it stands to reason that there would be less hunger, poverty, and ultimately homelessness. So, what do the pilot programs reveal about how individuals would allocate their cash infusions if they received an unconditional sum of money to support themselves? In the case of the 2019 Stockton SEED program, where participants each received $500 a month for two years to support themselves, a plurality of the funds were spent on groceries, with the next two largest portions coming from merchandise/retail sales and utilities (Ghuman, 2021). In the Los Angeles program, called Breathe started in 2022, participants were each given $1000 a month over the course of three years, once again the plurality is currently being spent on food, with merchandise/retail sales and transportation being the two next largest portions, with utilities close behind in forth (Guaranteed Income Pilots Dashboard, 2025). Another municipality in Northern California, Mountain View, developed and instituted their version of UBI in 2022 called Elevate MV, with participants receiving $500 a month for two years. This program

actually saw merchandise/retail sales in the plurality, barely edging out food and groceries for the top spot, however these two categories accounted for an astounding 83% of all spending (Guaranteed Income Pilots Dashboard, 2025).

The preliminary results from these pilot programs are promising for this policy intervention, but UBI is not without some criticism. There is empirical evidence to suggest that UBI programs are not beneficial at reducing poverty (Coote & Yazici, 2019), and that there is some decline in workforce participation (Kerman, 2021; Munnell 1986). Some theoretical models postulate that they might have detrimental effects for today's youth in the future (Dariuch & Fernandez, 2021). Another significant challenge for UBI is that it can be cost prohibitive. The pilot programs gave low sums of money, to few individuals, and they were still expensive endeavors. To develop and implement a program that meets all the criteria for UBI, it could cost municipalities billions, and on a federal level could likely cost the United States Trillions of dollars a year (Greenstein, 2019). This raises a question about the "U" in UBI. Would targeted payments be better than universal payments? There is some research that suggests targeted is better because it is cheaper and politically more feasible (Munnell, 1986), and indeed the State of California has created a targeted basic income program in this vein, aimed at assisting pregnant mothers and former foster youth (State of California, 2022).

Safe Parking and Camping Sites

Sleeping in vehicles on the side of a public roadway or in a tent in areas not meant for habitation is dangerous. Three quarters of the homeless population in California are unsheltered, with about 20 percent living in a vehicle, and 55 percent living on the street without a vehicle (Kushel et al., 2023). Additionally, many cities have ordinances which explicitly prohibit

sleeping in vehicles or camping in public areas (Pruss & Cheng, 2020). These ordinances and fines associated with these regulations, just perpetuate the cycle that keep the unsheltered on the street, by burdening them with additional interactions with law enforcement and building up additional costs that they cannot afford (Kushel et al., 2023). These ordinances have led to a large increase in citations for homeless individuals living in their vehicles or in encampments, which have resulted in court actions against jurisdictions taking these hardline measures (Gorn, 2018). Safe parking and camping sites are an increasingly popular intervention to reduce the number of citations that can hinder homeless individuals from achieving self-sufficiency, while also aiding the transition of homeless individuals into permanent housing.

In 2003, the City of Santa Barbara recognized that many of their homeless citizens were living in their vehicles in these unsafe conditions, so they developed a low-cost, first of its kind policy intervention called safe overnight parking in coordination with local non-profits, which opened in 2004, to address their growing crisis (City of Santa Barbara, n.d.). Safe parking programs repurpose parking lots for the safe and monitored use of individuals and families who are living in their vehicles (Berton, 2021). In the subsequent two decades other jurisdictions have also developed safe camping sites, or created them in conjunction with safe parking sites to address this issue (Morgen, 2022). Safe parking and camping sites can help homeless individuals meet their basic needs, as well as to find a sense of security and stability, which can ultimately help participants transition into permanent housing (Berton, 2021; Lewis et al., 2024; Morgen, 2022; Record, 2025).

Since the blueprint in Santa Barbara was created two decades ago, many different municipalities have instituted safe parking and camping sites as a response to the homelessness

crisis. In 2017, Los Angeles developed their Safe Parking LA after the city decriminalized sleeping in vehicles in 2014 (Safe Parking LA, n.d.). Since its inception, Safe Parking LA has transitioned hundreds of individuals into permanent housing, with 126 individuals transitioning in 2023 alone (Safe Parking LA, 2023). San Diego started Dreams for Change in 2009, and has since shared similar success to Los Angeles, and in 2023 transitioned 116 households in permanent housing (Dreams for Change, 2023). Palo Alto has seen more modest success with their safe parking program which was approved in 2020 and opened in 2021. They have only been successful in transitioning 58 individuals into permanent housing (Sheyner, 2025a), yet the city council recently expanded its operations in March of 2025 (Sheyner, 2025b). Safe parking and camping have not worked for every municipality which attempted it. San Francisco opened up their only safe parking site at Candlestick Point in 2022, spent about $15.5 million, and closed three years later in March of 2025, citing high costs and limited success for its demise (Angst, 2024). The proliferation of safe parking and camping sites, and the breadth of literature on the ranging levels of success of interventions, shows that outcomes can be heavily influenced by the area and municipality that in instituting and operating the program.

Section III: San Joaquin County

San Joaquin County has their motto prominently displayed on the top of their website homepage, “A Place to Thrive. San Joaquin County.” (n.d.). Yet a subset of the population is being left behind. The unsheltered population does not regularly sleep with a roof over their head, sleeping in uninhabitable areas subject to the elements. This is despite the fact that about $56,800 to $69,100 is spent per year, per homeless individual, for a grand total of $131 million to $160 million a year within the county (Amoroso-Pohl et al., 2023, pg. 13). The need for alternatives to

augment the current approach is transparent. The policies of tiny homes, UBI, and safe parking/camping have the potential to offer meaningful support for the unsheltered population, helping pave the way toward more stable living conditions and on a path to truly 'thrive'.

Currently there is a lack of emergency shelter and transitional housing beds for the number of unsheltered individuals within San Joaquin County. Of the 4,732 homeless individuals in San Joaquin County, 3,469 (73%), are unsheltered (San Joaquin County Continuum of Care, 2024). As of 2024, there are only 360 transitional housing beds dispersed around San Joquin County (HUD Exchange, 2024c). The emergency shelters, with a bed count of 1,412, run at about 90% capacity on a given night (San Joaquin County Continuum of Care, 2024, HUD Exchange, 2024c). Combined, the number of transitional emergency shelter beds in San Joaquin County can accommodate fewer than 40% of the total homeless population. If the county is truly committed to helping move unsheltered individuals off the streets and into safer, more stable living conditions, a significant increase in available housing units is essential.

Tiny Homes

Neither San Joaquin County nor any of the jurisdictions within the county, currently operate tiny home villages as a strategy to address homelessness. The closest related program is the Harmony Homes Project within the City of Lodi, which opened four small homes in 2022, each measuring 500 square feet, which exceeds the 400 square foot maximum used to define a tiny home, and much higher than the 205 square foot average discussed in the literature review (News-Sentinel Staff, 2022). These four houses were built for transitional/permanent housing use, at the price tag of around $1.5 million, which at $375,000 per unit, well above the average price for a tiny home, $21,000 (City of Lodi, n.d.). The project is worth highlighting because it

occupies a relatively small geographic footprint, less than a quarter acre (San Joaquin Geographic Information Systems (GIS), n.d.), and was primarily funding through a grant from The Homeless Emergency Assistance Program (HEAP), rather than directly from local taxpayers (City of Lodi, n.d.). Despite these factors, the project still faced significant community resistance, largely driven by NIMBY sentiments and concerns. The resistance proved effective in some respects, delaying the project and prompting the city to relocate it (Bowers, 2020; New-Sentinel Staff, 2022). A larger village designed to accommodate more unsheltered individuals may face even greater opposition, especially if proposed in densely populated areas.

Identifying and securing a location for a tiny home village at the county level is likely to be less complex than the process faced in Lodi. San Joaquin County spans an expansive area, covering 1,400 square miles, encompassing eight different municipalities. Yet roughly 63% of the county's total homeless population, and around 70% of the unsheltered individuals currently reside within the Stockton city limits (San Joaquin County Continuum of Care, 2024). Stockton also serves as the county seat, meaning many of San Joaquin County's resources are already centralized there. While community opposition is still likely in any populated area, several unincorporated pockets within Stockton city limits, particularly in more sparsely populated regions, may face less resistance than sites located within densely populated municipalities. Utilizing large tracts of unincorporated land in South Stockton could present a practical and feasible opportunity for the county to develop a tiny home village.

The area known as Kennedy, a census designated place (CDP) within Stockton city limits, has a population density of about 2,405 (San Joaquin County GIS, n.d.; United States Census Bureau, n.d.a) which is about half as densely populated as the neighborhoods within

Stockon or Lodi city limits (United States Census Bureau, 2024; United States Census Bureau, n.d.b). This area contains numerous large parcels of undeveloped land which are under the county's jurisdiction. A notable example is an approximately 18-acre uncultivated field, situated adjacent to an existing county owned property which includes a park and a community center (San Joaquin County GIS, n.d.). This lot is particularly well-suited for a tiny home village as the community center offers essential services such as eligibility assistance, job training, and food distributions, which can directly support the village residents.

The cost of developing the village may be a significant hurdle. Sacramento County successfully built 100 units on 3.5 acres (Sacramento County Geographic Information Systems, n.d.). That suggests that this lot could realistically accommodate up to 500 tiny homes. However, with the average cost per unit at $21,000, the total price would slightly exceed $10 million. A more feasible approach might be a phased development, building 100 units at a time, which would cost just over $2 million per phase. However, this estimate excludes land acquisition or infrastructure costs, which would substantially increase the overall expense of the project.

Universal Basic Income

To explore the feasibility of implementing the 'universal' component of UBI in San Joaquin County, a baseline cost is needed. There are two established baselines that might be appropriate here. The Stockton SEED initiative, the UBI pilot program that took place within San Joaquin County, paid recipients $500 a month for a total of $6,000 a year (SEED, 2021). Another baseline could be from 2020 presidential hopeful Andrew Yang, where he proposed a 'Freedom Dividend' of $1000 a month for a total of $12,000 a year (Yang2020, 2020). According to the United States Census Bureau, San Joaquin County has approximately 241,373 households, with

the average household size being 3.19 (2023). Based on these figures, a county-wide UBI would cost between $1.5 billion to $3 billion annually. This is either be more than or most of the county's projected expenditures of $2.82 billion for 2024-2025 fiscal year (San Joaquin County, 2024a). Simply put, the 'universal' aspect of UBI is financially untenable for San Joaquin County, especially given that counties in California lack broad revenue generating authority (California State Association of Counties, n.d.).

Targeted basic income payments may have a greater chance of success in San Joaquin County compared to the universal approach. Individuals facing higher levels of economic instability are significantly more at risk of becoming homeless. In 2024, the federal poverty line was roughly $25,800 for a household of three and $31,200 for a household of four (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024), by those thresholds San Joaquin County had roughly 13% of their households living in poverty (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Targeting this group with income payments will be administratively complex, but would cost significantly less. Estimating the average household income for those living below the poverty line in San Joaquin County is challenging due to limited data. However, even under the highly unrealistic assumption that every household below the poverty line had an annual income of $0, it would cost $1 billion dollars annually, roughly one-third of the county's entire budget (San Joaquin County, 2024a). While significant, this figure is still substantially lower than a 'universal' payment program. A more realistic estimate might assume that the average impoverished household earns roughly 50% of the federal poverty line. Under this assumption annual payments could be reduced to about $500 million. With a dedicated department in place to accurately track household income levels, the actual cost could be significantly lower, making

a targeted UBI program more fiscally viable. However, further research is necessary to refine these estimates and assess the true feasibility of administering such a targeted payment system.

As mentioned earlier, San Joaquin County already has some history with UBI. In 2019, Stockton Mayor Michael Tubbs launched the SEED program, a UBI pilot program that gave 125 randomly selected individuals $500 a month, for 24 months (SEED, 2021). This program concluded, and preliminary results have begun to emerge. Participants reported increased financial flexibility, allowing them to cover essential needs such as food and clothing. (Ghuman, 2021). Additionally, the program contributes to improvements in their overall social well-being (Ghuman, 2021). While these outcomes are encouraging, the program also had one notable political drawback.

In 2016, Michael Tubbs won the Stockton Mayoral race in a landslide, defeating the incumbent by over 40 percentage points (San Joaquin County, 2016). Yet just four years later in 2020, despite national recognition from a hit HBO documentary, high profile endorsements from former President Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey, and a favorable political climate for Democrats, Tubbs lost his re-election bid (Beam, 2020). Remarkably, he was defeated by more than 12 percentage points to a Republican newcomer, in a city where Democrats outnumber Republicans two to one in voter registration (San Joaquin County, 2020; Siders, 2020). The political reality is that the SEED program, championed by Mayor Tubbs, was not widely embraced in Stockton, a predominately blue-collar city that is generally less progressive than California as a whole (Beam, 2020). While the SEED initiative was not the sole reason for his decline in support, some local political consultants believe it played a significant role (Beam, 2020). In any case, the political will for a UBI program in San Joaquin County appears limited in

the wake of SEED. Elected officials are likely to remain cautious about backing similar efforts in the near future, rendering UBI political untenable for the time being.

Safe Parking/Safe Camping

In mid-2023, San Joaquin County launched a five-year Capital Improvement Plan (CIP), aimed at modernizing existing infrastructure and acquiring additional properties for future facility development (San Joaquin County, 2023). As part of this initiative, the county began the process in 2024 of purchasing the shuttered Oakmoore Golf Course, a 67.25-acre property located on unincorporated land within East Stockton (San Joaquin County, 2024b). The Board of Supervisors approved the $9.6 million dollar purchase with the intention of relocating and upgrading several county departments, including Public Works, Community Development, and Environmental Health, which are currently housed in aging facilities in South Stockton (Reynoso, 2024). Preliminary plans indicate that only 35 acres will be needed for these new facilities, leaving significant space for future development on the remaining land (Reynoso, 2024).

The purchase of Oakmoore Golf Course marked the culmination of a yearlong effort by the San Joaquin County Board of Supervisors to identify and acquire a site suitable for relocating several county departments. (San Joaquin County, 2024c). Oakmoore emerged as the ideal candidate due to its relatively low cost for the size of the property, central location within unincorporated Stockton, and the potential for future development given its expansive acreage (Reynoso, 2024; San Joaquin County, 2024c). However, behind the scenes the Board was also exploring the possibility of establishing a safe parking/camping site, to support the unsheltered

population, even traveling to other counties to inspect and study similar facilities (San Joaquin County, 2024c).

Ultimately, when the Board of Supervisors announced their intent to purchase the Oakmoore Golf Course, the statement included a mention of the possibility to open a safe camping installation on the property (San Joaquin County, 2024b). The interest the Board of Supervisors has shown for a safe camping/parking project is promising. Particularly because the land acquisition would not come from homelessness funding sources, but from the CIP funding streams, making this a more viable option. As with the Lodi project, some community members expressed opposition during the Board of Supervisors meeting, but this time there were also notable support from others in attendance (San Joaquin County, 2024c). Given that the property lies within unincorporated lands, the future of this proposal may face less resistance compared to similar efforts within city limits.

A safe parking/camping site would be significantly more cost-effective than the alternative interventions previously discussed. The Oakmoore site already includes an existing parking lot suitable for vehicle-based shelter and it has substantial green space for tents. Additionally, essential utilities such as water, sewer, and electricity are already connected to the site, and any necessary upgrades will likely occur as part of the broader infrastructure improvements for the new county facilities. The primary expense would be security and supportive services, which are in line with costs for other homelessness interventions. Providing a designated, secure space where unsheltered individuals have access to restrooms, showers, and a measure of security and stability, represents a substantial improvement over life on the streets. Additionally, it will help mitigate issues related to illegal and unregulated encampments on

private or public land. Given its relatively low cost, existing infrastructure, and potential for meaningful impact, the intervention of safe camping/parking presents a promising and practical solution.

Section IV: Conclusion and Recommendations

San Joaquin County is facing a growing homelessness crisis. Despite significant investments in addressing the issue, the number of homeless individuals continues to rise, even as neighboring counties report declines. The county should augment the current strategy with a safe camping/parking facility at the recently acquired Oakmoore Golf Course. This approach offers a cost-effective way to move unsheltered individuals out of unsafe, uninhabitable conditions and into a space that offers basic amenities and a greater sense of security. In addition to improving the quality of life for those homeless individuals, it would help reduce the visibility and impact that encampments have across the county. As a central location, this site would also allow county workers and outreach specialists easier access to connect these homeless individuals with essential services.

There is a compelling case to be made for investing in tiny home villages as part of the County's strategy to address the homelessness crisis. Given that San Joaquin County only has 360 transitional beds available for a homeless population exceeding 4,700, the current situation is clearly unsustainable. While the initial costs of a tiny home village may be significant, it is critical to begin laying the groundwork now to expand transitional housing options. The County should task the Human Services Agency, in conjunction with the Community Development Department, with developing a comprehensive plan that would include a technical analysis to better understand the actual costs of opening a tiny home village within San Joaquin County, and

which identifies sites and presents multiple design and funding options for the near future. Sacramento County's experience shows that establishing these villages can take years, San Joaquin County must act now to ensure tangible progress is made by the end of the decades.

Pairing the emergency shelter intervention of safe parking/camping and the transitional housing approach of tiny home villages, gives San Joaquin County a practical, phased path forward. This dual approach allows the county to respond quickly, offering immediate relief from the unsafe, uninhabitable conditions, while simultaneously building a longer-term vision to help unsheltered individuals move toward stable housing. These policies alone may not fully resolve the homelessness crisis within San Joaquin County, and that is okay. The goal and priority are to provide some of our most vulnerable residents with safe, secure environments that restore dignity and create a foundation for progress. Lasting change begins with stability, only then can individuals truly begin the journey toward self-sufficiency and a better quality of life.

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