

# Barriers to Progress

What America Believes About Homelessness



## INVISIBLE PEOPLE BELIEVES

That solving homelessness starts with addressing poverty. Living wages, accessible healthcare, affordable housing, and tenant protections keep people from becoming homeless.

That both interim housing and permanent supportive housing are necessary to help people move into housing.

That bureaucratic barriers and the criminalization of homelessness make it harder for homeless people to access services and housing.

That homeless and formerly homeless people must be included in decision-making about homelessness policy.

That public education and narrative change can create the political will to drive policy change.



## A NOTE FROM THE FOUNDER

**Across the country, we are seeing increasingly loud calls for the criminalization and banishment of homeless people. While housing solutions remain slow to materialize, communities are moving resources into getting homeless people out of sight. This shift in policy will exacerbate the problem, not solve it.**

There are several reasons for this shift. Many see the growing homelessness crisis as a public nuisance rather than the humanitarian crisis that it is. Organic, local opposition, and well-funded negative propaganda campaigns reinforce harmful beliefs. In this time of unprecedented polarization, changing the narrative surrounding homelessness has never been more important. To overcome the barriers to solving homelessness, we need narratives that reframe our cultural and political conversations about homelessness. We must make the truth louder.

We're also seeing the homeless sector pay more attention to the power of messaging and storytelling. However, shifts in narratives and perceptions must be part of a broader change in our culture, not just a campaign. Invisible People is committed to publishing messaging research and developing tools for advocates and policymakers. We hope that the support for narrative change work will continue to grow the movement for real solutions.



**Mark Horvath,**  
FOUNDER OF INVISIBLE PEOPLE

*Charmain has been homeless since 2005; these photos of her were taken in 2013, 2020, and 2021. Her story recently appeared on [Last Week Tonight with John Oliver](#).*

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# Introduction

## INTERSECTIONS

Policing

Housing  
Policy

Economic  
Inequality

Health and  
Disability

Gender Identity  
and Sexuality

Racism and  
Discrimination

Homelessness

## When we talk about homelessness, what are we really talking about?

Homelessness isn't a single problem; it's a symptom of many problems. Policy choices about health, housing, policing, discrimination, and labor have helped shape this crisis. But as a sector, when we talk about homelessness, we're too often starting from a place that isolates homelessness as an issue from these other forces.

In [last year's report](#), we surveyed Americans with in-depth questions about homelessness to measure public perceptions of homelessness. This year's report seeks to delve deeper into the intersections between homelessness, housing, and policing, and explore how people's perceptions and experiences impact their views about homelessness.

Messaging about policy is often about framing the issue: how can we present the problem and solution in the best possible light? What is included and excluded from the conversation? As messengers, we devote time to this framing work, but the public comes to conversations with their own preexisting ideas. These implicit frameworks might come from other policy issues, political preferences, or even the demographics and personal experiences of the individual.

Most importantly, these personal and local issues are often determining factors in how communities react to proposed projects and policies on homelessness. Often loud and angry opposition to solutions does not come about in a vacuum. By examining the intersections of homelessness and other issues, we hope to help messengers and advocates better understand, differentiate, and speak to the concerns of their audiences as they do the important work of building support for the solutions we need.



# Executive Summary



A key finding in our 2020 report was that while people care about homelessness and are generally sympathetic toward homeless people, they are not necessarily devoting much time to thinking about the issue. However, in both 2020 and 2021, the data shows that opinions on homelessness are highly polarized.

Looking beyond the data, we see this playing out every day in cities across the country. Local news stations run serialized reports portraying supposed chaos on the streets. New York, Los Angeles, and Austin have all seen political campaigns that seek to divide housed people from their homeless neighbors, using anti-homeless rhetoric and misinformation to blame homeless people for all manner of community problems.

## **If people aren't spending much time thinking about homelessness, what's driving these highly divided opinions?**

The opinions people bring to homelessness are informed by their identity, their experiences, their social context, and their political commitments. Discussions about homelessness inevitably intersect with issues of housing, neighborhood character, crime, policing, race, faith, and the overall political climate. In practice, this means that even without much exposure to information specifically about homelessness, views can be strongly held, especially when they're reinforced by neighbors and friends.

This report seeks to connect homelessness back to related issues that inform people's opinions in this area: their feelings about housing and neighborhood development; their opinions of police practices; their race; their faith; and, of course, their general political leanings.



# 70%

**BELIEVE HOMELESSNESS INCREASED  
IN THEIR COMMUNITY THIS YEAR**



**“The story was about all of the homeless people camping out near uptown in Charlotte, NC and how property owners wanted to get rid of them. The story is a sad story, because first of all so many people are homeless now, but it is also frustrating because as a property owner you don't want all these people living there and causing a variety of issues. I really can appreciate how difficult the situation must be.”**

**WOMAN, 67, CHARLOTTE, NC \***

*\* Quoted statements are verbatim responses from survey respondents.*



## Why Criminalization?

Fundamentally, homelessness is an issue of housing. However, enforcement and the criminalization of homelessness have long been a part of local government's toolkit in addressing homelessness. Criminalization strategies include sit-sleep-lie bans, to camping bans, and anti-panhandling laws. Over the past several years, these conversations have become more urgent, as a [successful 2021 ballot measure in Austin](#) and a [potential 2022 measure in Los Angeles](#)

are putting these questions directly to voters. Some politicians have gravitated to these messages, arguing that enforcement measures will end homelessness on our streets.

Despite these increasingly loud calls for more aggressive enforcement, the public does not view policing as a panacea for homelessness. Most people still view housing, not policing, as the key to solving our crisis – nearly 3 in 4 believe housing is a more important solution than policing. As with last year, enforcement measures remain more controversial than policies providing housing, services, and shelter. While the public does not support blanket anti-homeless policies, there is more support for targeted bans aimed at school zones, as well as measures aimed at clearing sidewalks.

Countering the anti-homeless messages that drive criminalization campaigns will require advocates to speak to the public's fears. We must address those concerns in a way that doesn't pit housed people and homeless people against each other. This requires messages that speak to peoples' shared interests in safe and clean public spaces, and that push back on perspectives that blame and demonize homeless people.



**“There was a perfectly orderly homeless campsite in a grassy empty lot near a library about a mile from my home. I used to walk by it every day & it seemed like the best homeless encampment I'd ever seen. Then I read in the news that they're evacuating the area with no plan to give these people somewhere else to live AND they're going to ticket people who remained in the vacant lot. Ticketing homeless people? It seems insane.”**

**MAN, 59, AUSTIN, TX**

But crime and policing are not only linked to homelessness. Since the outbreak of mass protests following the death of George Floyd, issues of race and policing have taken center stage in political conversations at the local, state, and federal levels. On all sides, voices have gotten louder, and divisions between community activists and pro-police voices have only grown starker.

These polarized opinions about policing bleed into social issues around homelessness that would seem unrelated to policing. Among those who believe the police are racially biased, there is more support across the board for supportive solutions to homelessness. Those who see the police as unbiased don't just support enforcement measures, but are more likely to oppose housing and services.



## **Homelessness, Housing, and Neighborhoods**

Discussions about homelessness are inevitably tied to questions about what to build and where. Whether we're looking at affordability issues that drive people into homelessness or attempting to find sites for projects that will help people out of it, policies connected to homelessness will inevitably impact neighborhoods.

When people imagine the future of their neighborhood, the most common changes they want to see are increased safety and more affordable housing prices. These aspirations provide an entry point for advocates, as safety and affordability offer common ground to help connect to the general public and build empathy leading to support for solutions.



When the public envisions a nice neighborhood, the image they picture is most often full of owner-occupied, single-family homes. When asked what types of housing people want to see more of, these homes are by far the most popular choice. Rental housing in general, but especially large apartment buildings, are not necessarily part of that vision. Homeowners are viewed positively, while renters are viewed more skeptically. The public is particularly skeptical of developers, who are viewed more negatively than homeowners, tenants, or even politicians.

This raises practical concerns for those seeking to build homelessness projects and affordable housing, but it also makes it easier to understand the role of homeowners, and especially homeowners' associations, in housing and homelessness politics at the neighborhood level. Homeowners are seen as the most legitimate stakeholders in their neighborhoods, meaning their views have outsized importance.

**Homeowners as a group are less supportive of projects to house homeless people, and more likely to support measures aimed at anti-homeless enforcement.**

They express more concerns about homeless people posing a threat to themselves and their neighborhoods, and more judgmental views on the causes of homelessness.

Of course, these descriptions don't apply to all homeowners. But the more conservative views of homeowners find expression through homeowners' associations and other organizations with influence in local politics. In 2019, [this dynamic killed a proposed shelter](#) in the Sherman Oaks neighborhood of Los Angeles, as the Sherman Oaks Homeowners' Association organized protests and threatened to recall their local councilmember.

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**“Homeless encampments are threatening public safety at two public parks I used to go to very often, but I’m too afraid to do so now because of increasing number of crimes committed there.”**

WOMAN, 46, SEATTLE, WA

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**“I saw a woman that was homeless with her kids. She was trying very hard to take care of them and herself. This reminded me of my family when we were struggling through some hard times.”**

WOMAN, 27, CHARLOTTE, NC



## Race, Racism, and Homelessness

Racism is at the center of housing issues in the United States, both historically and in the present day. In the 20th century, as many middle-class white families built wealth through homeownership, black Americans were [excluded from this process](#) through red-lining, restrictive covenants, and other formal and informal methods of neighborhood segregation. We see the consequences of discriminatory housing policies on our streets. As the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#) notes, African Americans make up just 13 percent of the general population, but nearly 40 percent of the homeless population.

While the American Dream of single-family homeownership offered opportunities to white residents, it was also a process of racial segregation. Describing this history, [KOED's Erin Baldassari](#) put it this way: “when cities first created neighborhoods where only single-family houses were allowed, it was about more than separating homes from apartments; it was about separating white families from everyone else.” These attitudes cast a shadow over contemporary discussions of homelessness and affordable housing, as comparatively wealthy, disproportionately white homeowners employ racialized rhetoric to resist changes that might bring poor and/or non-white people into neighborhoods. Viewing these responses through a colorblind lens ignores the role racism continues to play in shaping discussions and policy choices about homelessness and poverty.

Structural racism shapes how we interact with law enforcement, job prospects, and access to resources more generally. It's also built into our social safety net; a recent study from the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#) outlines how Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a central part of our welfare system, has been shaped by “more than a century of false and harmful narratives — such as that Black women are unfit mothers — and paternalistic policies that sought to control Black women's behavior and compel their labor,” finding that “these ideas and policies still influence TANF today.”



People's personal experiences with poverty and housing insecurity vary greatly by race, and those differences are apparent in people's opinions around homelessness. Black Americans are far more likely than white Americans to have experienced homelessness or eviction, or to know a close friend or family member who has. White Americans also hold more conservative political views in general. As a result, different ethnic communities are often having very different conversations about homelessness. When that conversation is closer to home, views on homelessness are more permissive and empathetic. On criminalization, these differences are even greater, reflecting very different views on policing across racial lines.

## Politics and Faith

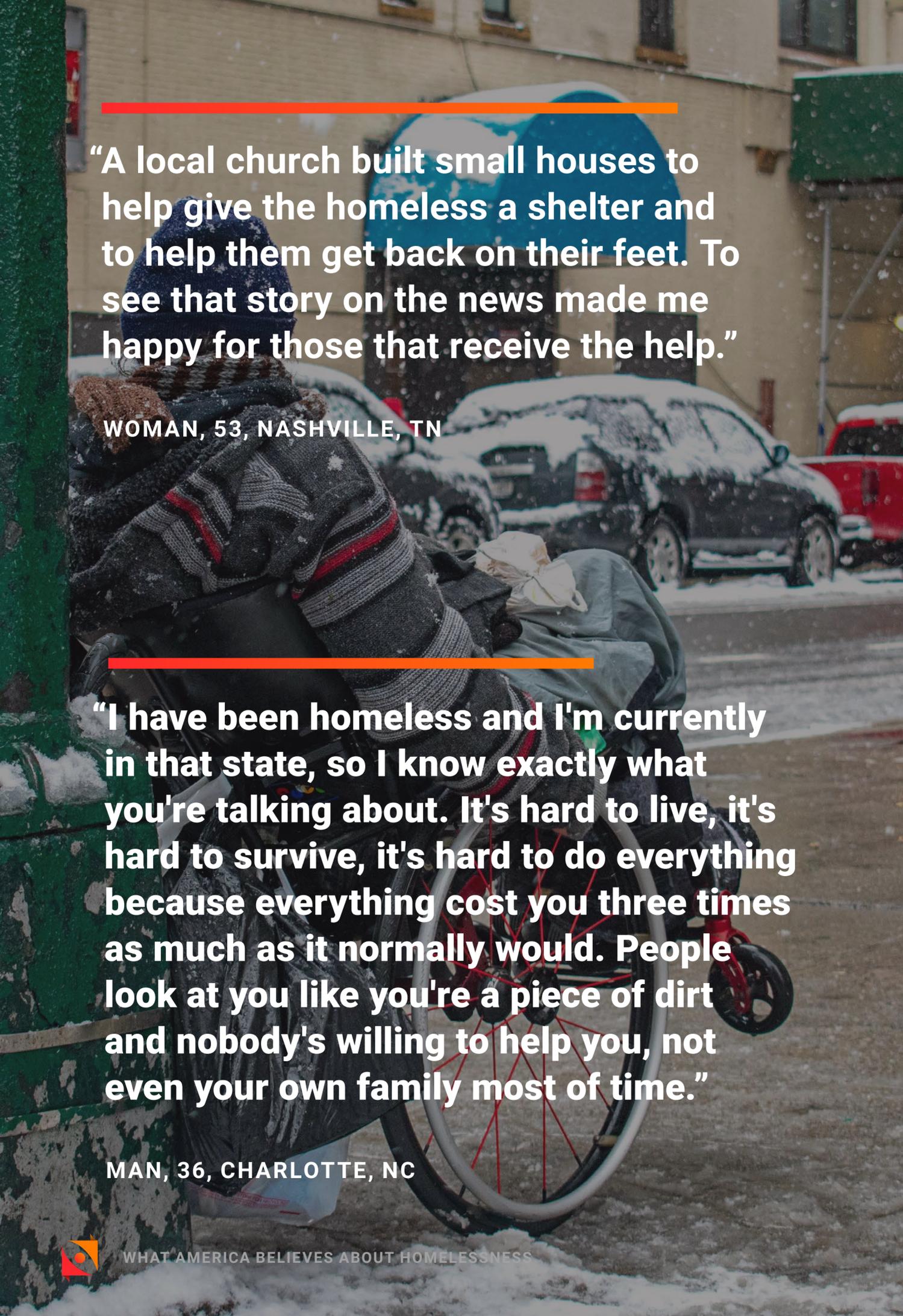
The identities and experiences people carry are a major part of how they come to form their views on any issue. In addition to race, political leaning, and religion are strong determinants in people's views on homelessness. All three are salient identities in American life, especially at a time when it feels like our divisions are greater than ever.

While political views obviously influence policy preferences, whether someone identifies as right- or left-leaning strongly correlates with their opinions about homeless people, the causes of homelessness, and the appropriate response. Conservative opposition to government programs creates opposition to government-provided shelter and housing, while those on the left are more primed to be critical of approaches that lean on policing and enforcement. Faith also drives significant differences in opinion. Because faith groups are often deeply involved in providing services, it is natural to assume that religious communities are generally supportive of positive solutions. To some extent this is true; despite having more conservative views, highly religious people were more supportive of shelter and housing in their neighborhood. However, they were less supportive of government intervention in those areas, and more supportive than non-religious people of increased policing and enforcement.

**“There is a closed church nearby that was taken over by [a] homeless encampment. It caused many problems for local residents and businesses. It was cleared out and some people moved to a nearby park... Cleared out again and moved back to the church. Endless cycle and the problems persist. Now it's getting colder and there seems to be no solution.”**

**WOMAN, 60, SEATTLE, WA**



A photograph of a person in a wheelchair on a snowy street. The person is wearing a dark winter hat and a grey and black striped jacket. They are leaning against a green utility pole. In the background, there are snow-covered cars and a building with a blue awning. The scene is set in winter with snow on the ground and falling.

**“A local church built small houses to help give the homeless a shelter and to help them get back on their feet. To see that story on the news made me happy for those that receive the help.”**

WOMAN, 53, NASHVILLE, TN

**“I have been homeless and I'm currently in that state, so I know exactly what you're talking about. It's hard to live, it's hard to survive, it's hard to do everything because everything cost you three times as much as it normally would. People look at you like you're a piece of dirt and nobody's willing to help you, not even your own family most of time.”**

MAN, 36, CHARLOTTE, NC

Religion again shows the importance of intersecting factors, as highly religious people's views vary quite a bit once race is factored in. Among highly religious white people, there is high support for policing, and less focus on the importance of affordability and financial concerns driving homelessness. Non-white highly religious people are more supportive of government action, more likely to have personal experience with homelessness, and are more critical of policing and enforcement measures.

## **Overcoming Barriers: Putting Homelessness into Context**

While this report points in many directions, the most important takeaway is that discussions of homelessness don't occur in a vacuum. Maintaining a narrow focus can create the appearance that homelessness solutions are uncontroversial. Who doesn't want to help someone without a home? But simplifying the issue can mean failing to account for the unexpected barriers that policy changes encounter in the real world. In order to effectively create change, we must identify and confront those barriers.

What these barriers mostly have in common is that they're local. Every new unit of housing and every shelter bed is in someone's neighborhood. And whenever a neighborhood changes, even in small ways, someone will be there to loudly resist that change. But there are also people with questions, confusion, and genuine concerns, even if they're sometimes misguided. If we're going to succeed in solving homelessness, we need to find ways to uplift authentic voices within local communities that can credibly deliver messages of compassion.

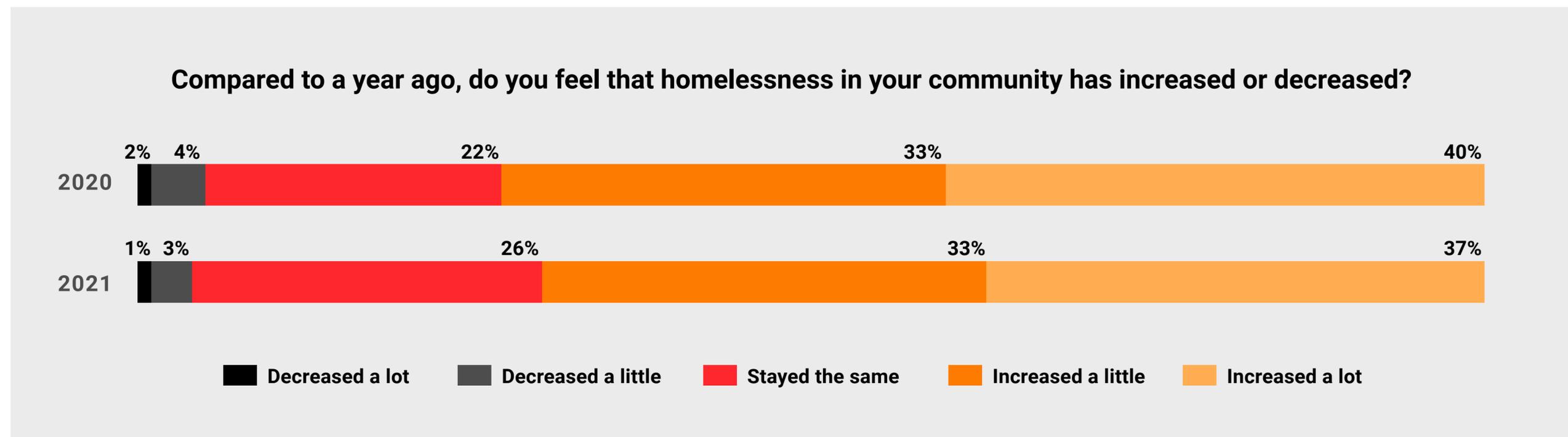


# Benchmarking Opinions On Homelessness



# Homelessness Remains a Visible Problem

In many big ways, perceptions of homelessness have not moved much in the past year. A majority continue to see homelessness growing in their communities, perceptions which have held stable since 2020. This is likely due to the lack of visible progress. Among those who believe homelessness is growing, 60% said they believe that based on what they see with their own eyes. This continues to pose a problem for messaging that focuses on success stories. While housing and services have improved the lives of many people, the visibility of homelessness leaves most people believing the crisis is getting worse, making success messaging less credible.



**"[Homelessness] is everywhere, which is very unusual for this area. It's really sad. Tents all over the streets, open fields, vacant business parking lots. This just didn't exist like this 18 months ago. You might see a homeless person now and then. But now it's every block."**

**WOMAN, 65, PORTLAND, OR**

**When asked to say in their own words why they thought homelessness is increasing in their community:**

**60%**

**SAID THEIR BELIEFS ARE BASED ON WHAT THEY SEE ON THE STREETS**

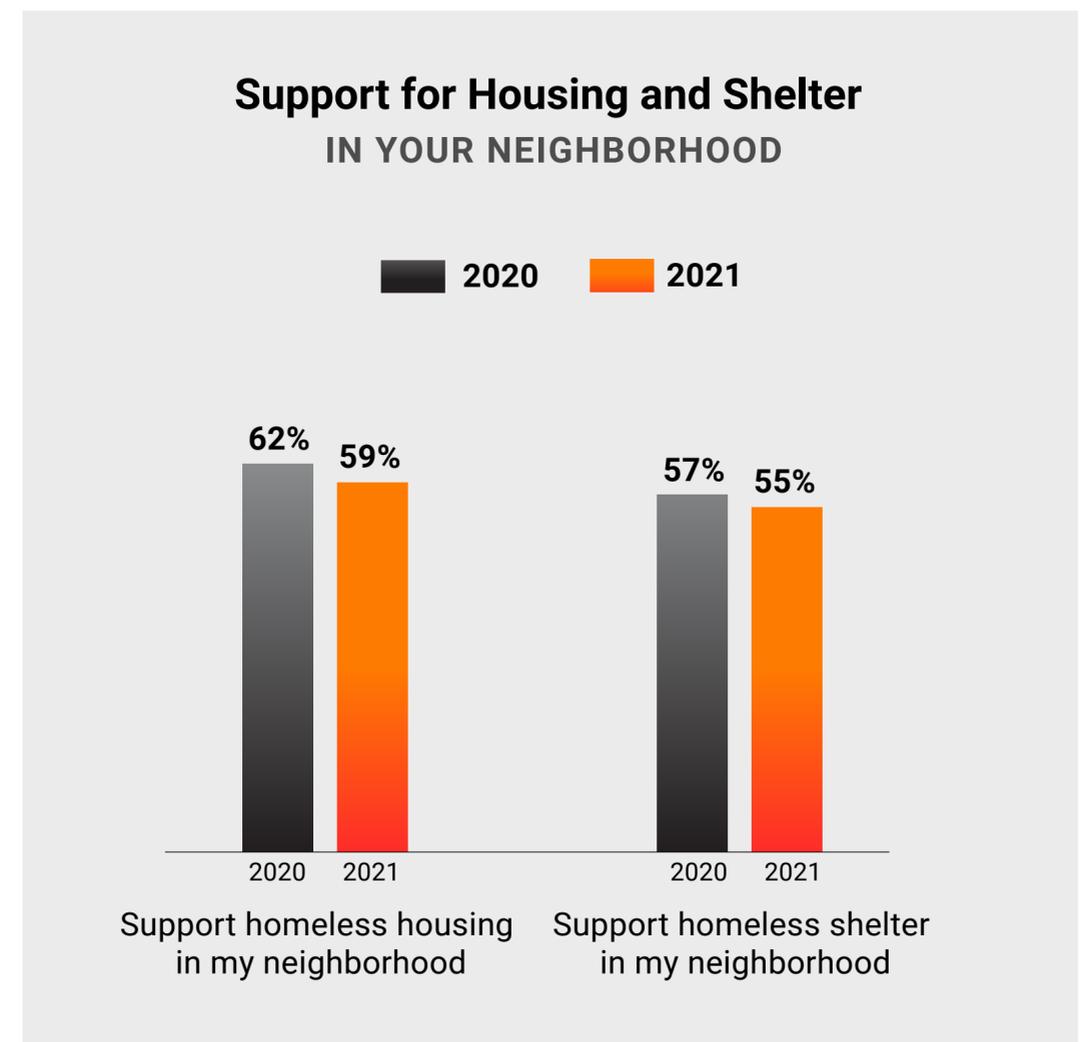
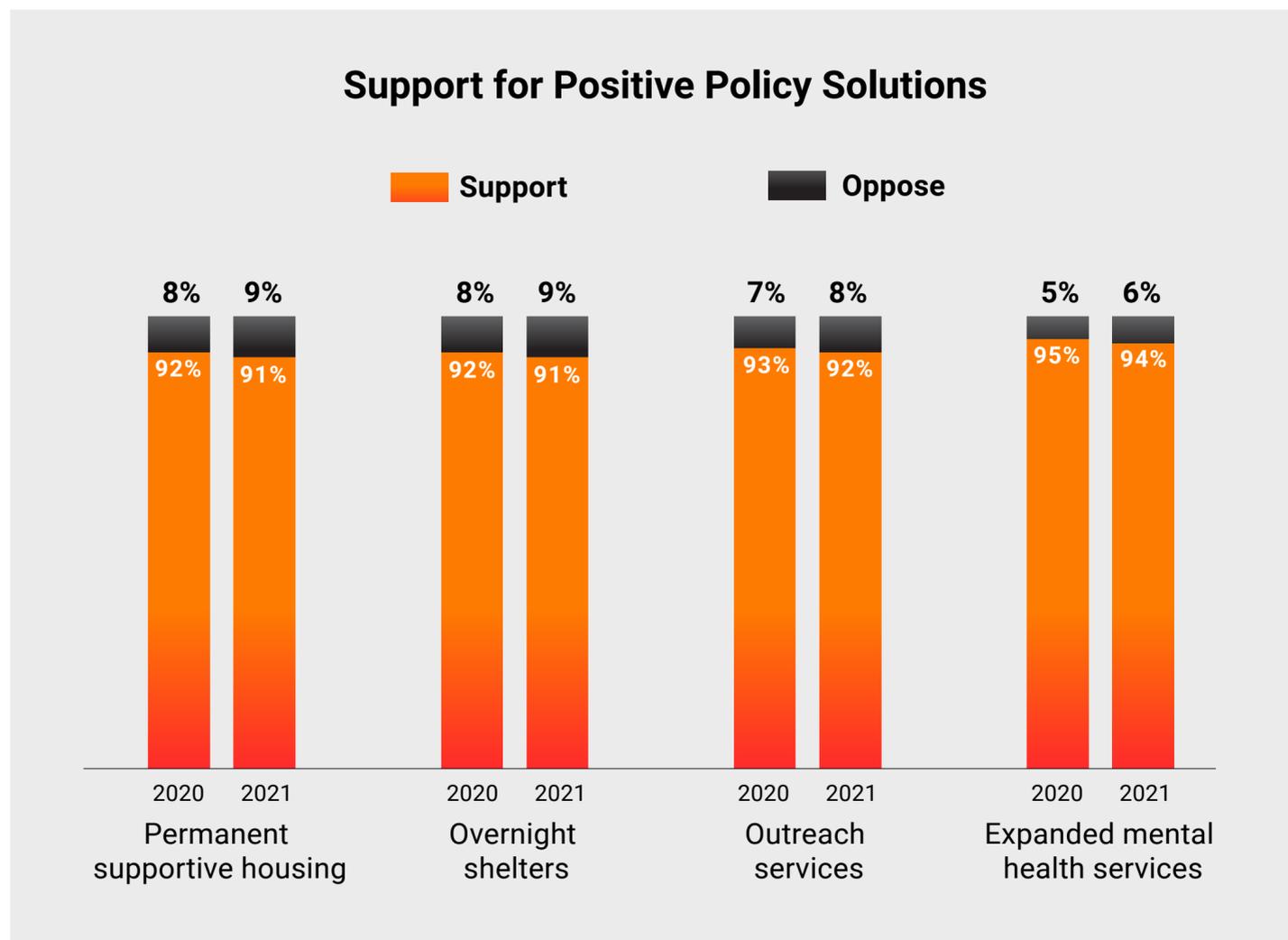
QA4: Compared to a year ago, do you feel that homelessness in your community has increased or decreased?

qA4oe: You said you believe homelessness has [pipe: qA4 lower] in your community in the past year. What makes you think that?



# Support for Humane Solutions Remains High

Overall, support for programs like permanent supportive housing, shelters, and services remains robust, with nearly 3 out of 4 people supporting each of these policies. Support drops somewhat when the question is specifically about shelter or housing in their own neighborhood. However, most people continue to support projects to build homeless shelters or housing in their neighborhoods. These findings raise one of the key questions of this report: if there is widespread support for these policies, what are the barriers that prevent us from investing in these solutions at scale?



QA15: Below are a few policies that local governments might implement to address homelessness. For each policy below, please indicate how much you support that policy.

QA17: If there was a plan to build a homeless housing project with on-site services in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?

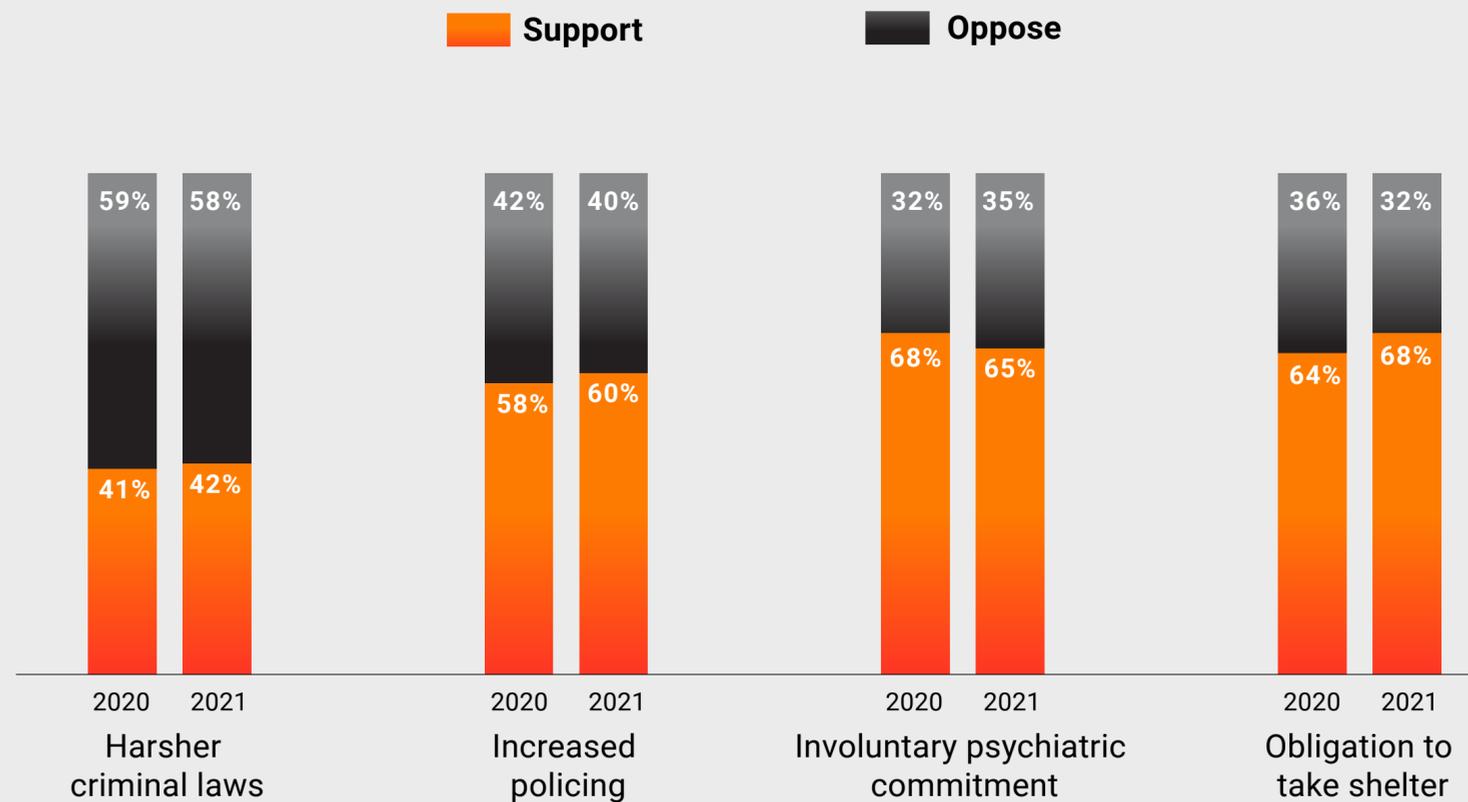
QA18: If there was a plan to build a homeless shelter in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?



# Enforcement Policies Remain Controversial

As our 2020 research demonstrated, enforcement-focused policies tend to be more controversial than service- and housing-focused policies. The public's views on these policies remains largely unchanged. While almost every policy tested saw more support than opposition, harsher criminal laws remains the one exception. These laws are often championed by extremely loud voices, so it can be easy to think that there is a majority out there hungry for more crackdowns on encampments. However, public opinion consistently shows that the public believes policies should focus on getting people into housing, and not just out of a given area.

## Support for Enforcement Policies

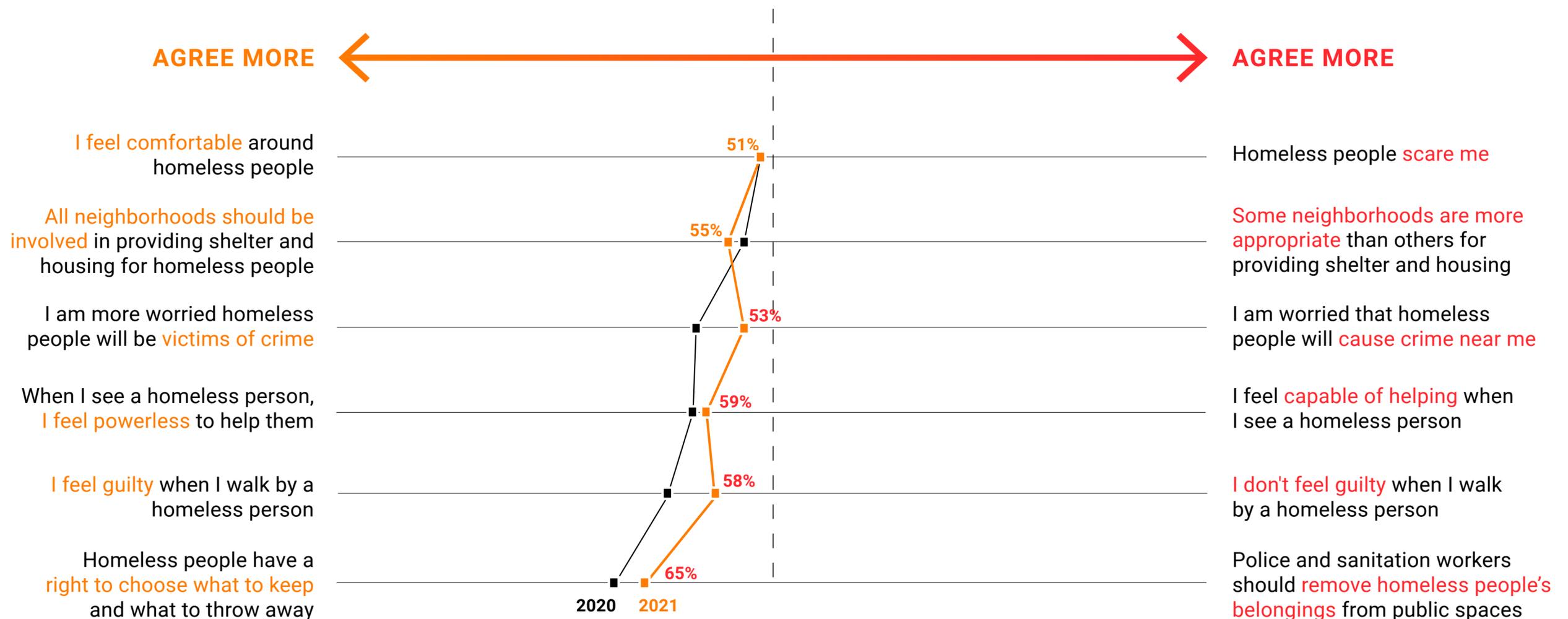


QA15: Below are a few policies that local governments might implement to address homelessness. For each policy below, please indicate how much you support that policy.



# Public Attitudes About Homeless People

Public attitudes toward homeless people remained consistent with 2020, showing a combination of personal hesitancy about interacting with homeless people and more sympathetic views about homelessness as an issue. One shift is concerning, however: more respondents reported worrying that homeless people will commit crimes. While the year-over-year change is relatively small (6 percentage points), it may be an early indicator of an anti-homeless political backlash, something present in campaigns for candidates and ballot measures pushing harsher enforcement in cities like Austin, Seattle, Los Angeles, and San Francisco.

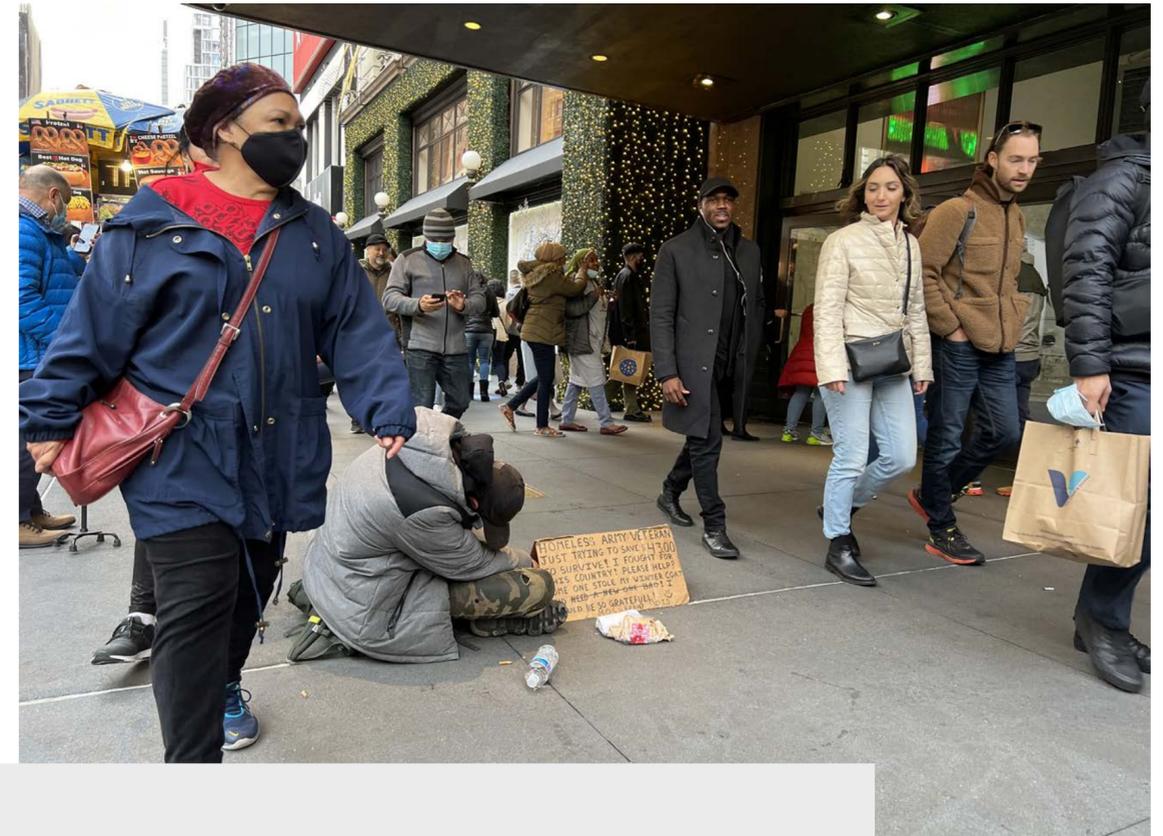


QA9A: For each pair of statements below, please select which one better describes your feelings about homelessness.

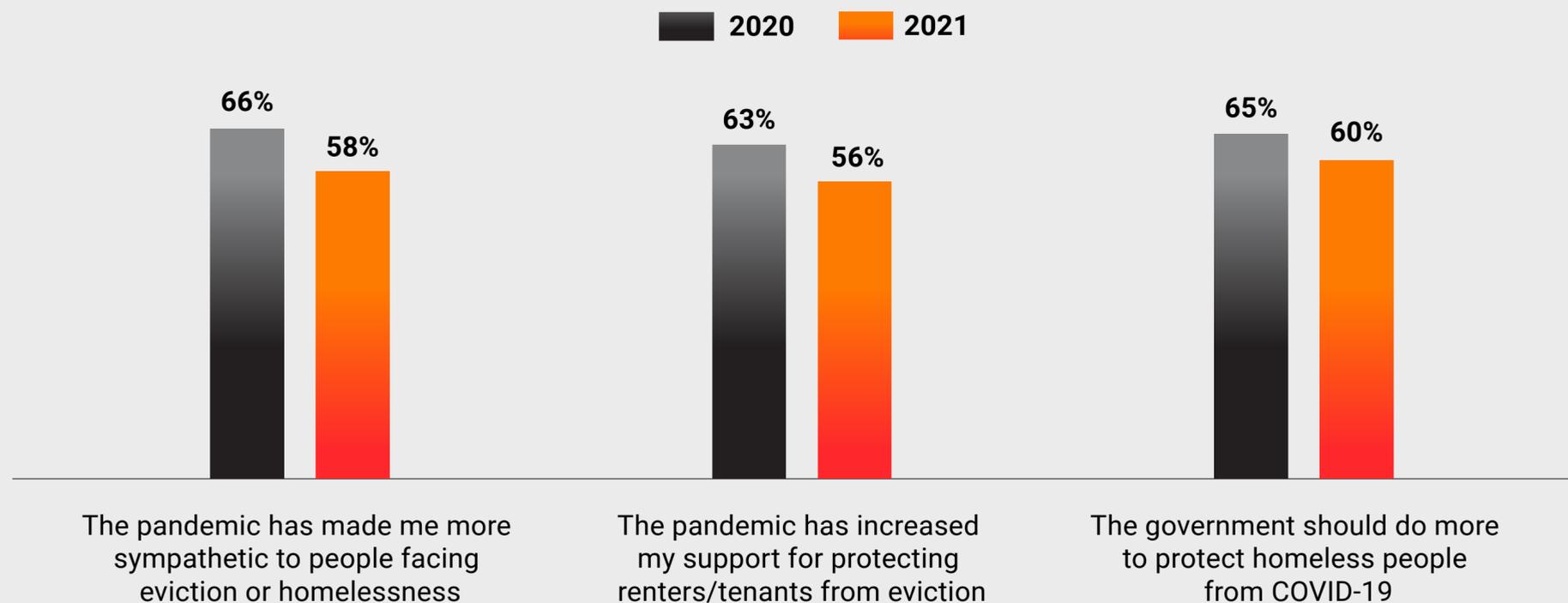


# Is COVID Fatigue Setting In?

Last year's report found that the pandemic made people more sympathetic to the concerns of homeless people and renters facing eviction. While this is still true for the majority, those measures declined significantly. After 18 months in pandemic, an initial wave of sympathy may now be fading as people return to normal or adjust to their current situation. For both advocates and politicians, the extraordinary circumstances since March 2020 have provided a powerful argument for putting additional resources into homeless services. However, this data suggests that the effectiveness of pandemic messaging may be wearing off to some extent.



## Pandemic Effect on Attitudes

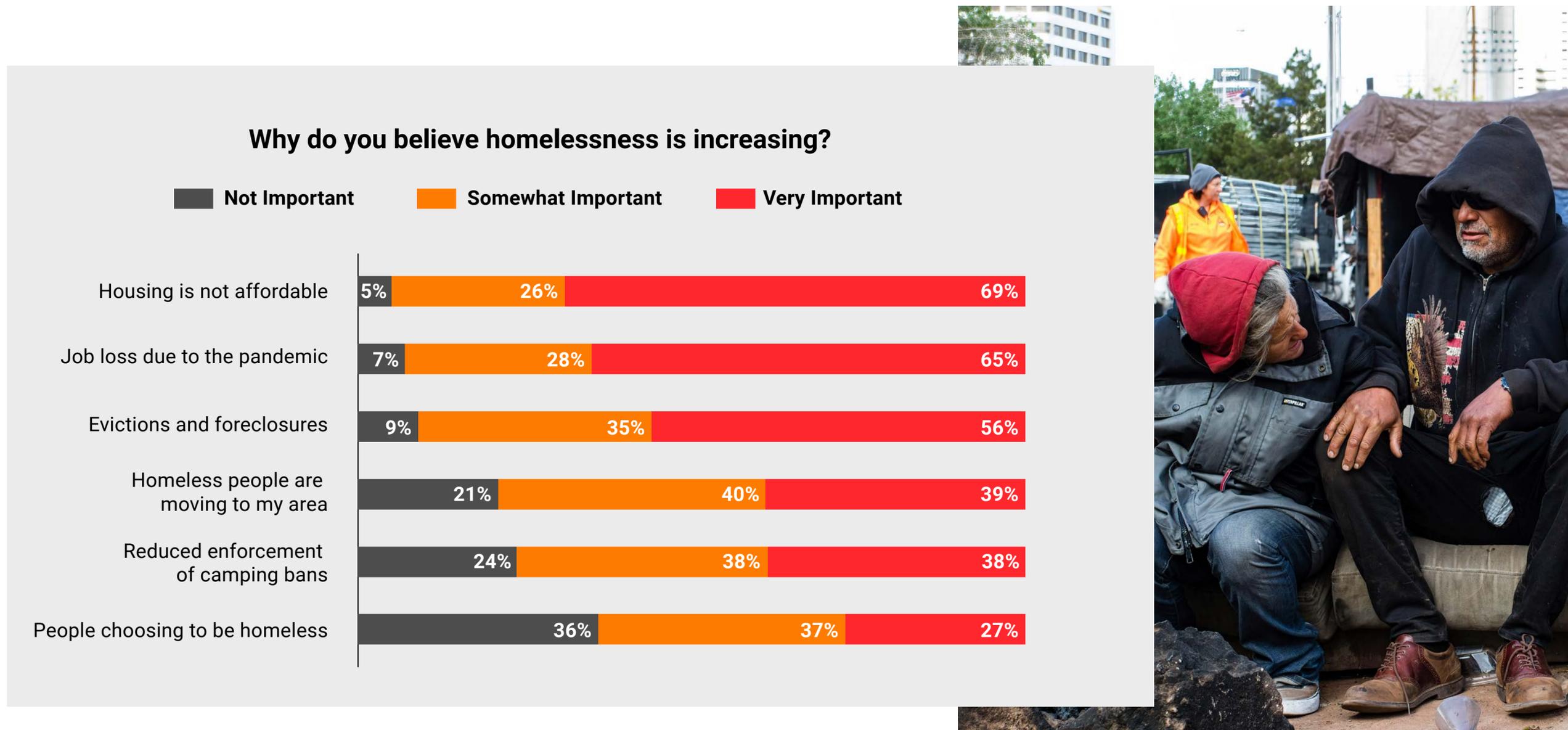


QA6: Next, we're going to show you a series of words or phrases you may or may not associate with homelessness. If you associate that word or phrase with homelessness or homeless people, press "Agree", otherwise, press "Disagree."



# Why is Homelessness Increasing in 2021?

When asked about the substantive reasons for increasing homelessness, respondents focused on issues like affordable housing, job loss due to the pandemic, and a rise in evictions and foreclosures. In contrast, non-economic explanations like lax anti-camping enforcement or people choosing to be homeless were considered less important. This is good news for advocates, suggesting that the public intuitively connects homelessness to struggles with jobs and housing, and is less captured by judgmental explanations that view homelessness as the result of individual behavior and choices.



QA15: Below are a few policies that local governments might implement to address homelessness. For each policy below, please indicate how much you support that policy.



# Demographics: Perception vs. Reality

In last year’s report, we explored the gap between public and expert opinion, especially around the causes of homelessness. This year, respondents estimated the portion of homeless people who fall within various categories. In some cases, such as estimating the share of people who had faced domestic violence, the public’s perceptions were consistent with expert estimates. However, the public underestimates both youth homelessness and homelessness among Black and Hispanic individuals. In contrast, the public radically overestimates the share of homeless veterans, suggesting that stories about veteran homelessness have made a strong impact over the past several decades.

What percentage of homeless people are...	Survey Estimate	HUD Estimate
Black or Hispanic	26%	52% <sup>1</sup>
Veterans	21%	8% <sup>2</sup>
Under 25 Years Old	18%	26% <sup>3</sup>
Fleeing domestic violence	17%	15% <sup>4</sup>

**“I’ve seen a lot of stories about homelessness and people living on the streets downtown. It makes me sad to see how many veterans and others live like this. How many can’t afford to live and have healthcare.”**

**WOMAN, 41, KANSAS CITY, KS**

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2018-AHAR-Part-2.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2020-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/sites/default/files/pdf/2018-AHAR-Part-2.pdf>

qA20: Below are a few issues homeless people may have. Using your best guess, what percentage of homeless people deal with each of the following issues?



## Case Study: Visibility and Community Homeless Counts

In 2021, due to concerns about COVID-19, the LA Homeless Services Authority canceled its annual volunteer point-in-time count. Despite this, multiple communities [stepped up to do their own smaller counts](#).

Organizers and counters expected to find growing numbers of homeless individuals in the tracts they counted, as the visibility of encampments had increased during the pandemic. Surprisingly, these community counts consistently found that the number of individuals had remained steady or declined in their areas. On the other hand, the number of structures and tents had increased significantly compared to the previous year's count.

This example underlines the important role that visible street homelessness plays in forming public opinion. It also helps explain the temptation of enforcement policies for local leaders, as reducing the visibility of homelessness provides an easier way to signal success to the public than the harder work of getting people into housing.

The count was also an opportunity for community building. Jackie Vorhauer, an organizer of the count, described how the Hollywood community came together. "You have to have community if you're going to end homelessness...This is all about collaboration from residents, to businesses, to nonprofits, to faith groups, to grassroots orgs, and to our elected officials. We can't work in a silo if we're going to effectively address homelessness."



# Homelessness and Policing



## Why Focus on Policing and Criminalization?



As the visibility of homelessness grew during the pandemic, officials in communities across the country faced increasingly loud calls to do something. From individual residents frustrated by encampments in their area, to organized business and homeowner groups with a desire to “clean up the city” more broadly. In some cases, this led to

positive developments, such as programs in multiple states that leased or purchased unused hotel space and repurposed it as temporary or permanent housing for homeless people. While scaling up these programs created challenges, thousands who had previously lived on the street were housed in private rooms, providing both a place to stay and comparative safety from exposure to COVID-19.

While these programs made some difference, the increased visibility of homelessness on the streets has left politicians fielding complaints from frustrated constituents. Under that pressure, many cities have turned to measures that seek to criminalize and banish unhoused people. As the ACLU of Southern California noted in [a 2021 report](https://www.aclusocal.org/sites/default/files/outsidethelaw-aclufdnsca-report.pdf):

**“Instead of meeting the affordable housing and basic survival needs of its entire unhoused population, local and state governments are responding to the increased visibility of houselessness with misguided and discriminatory strategies. Many of these tactics are designed to rid the community of the visible presence of unhoused people.”**

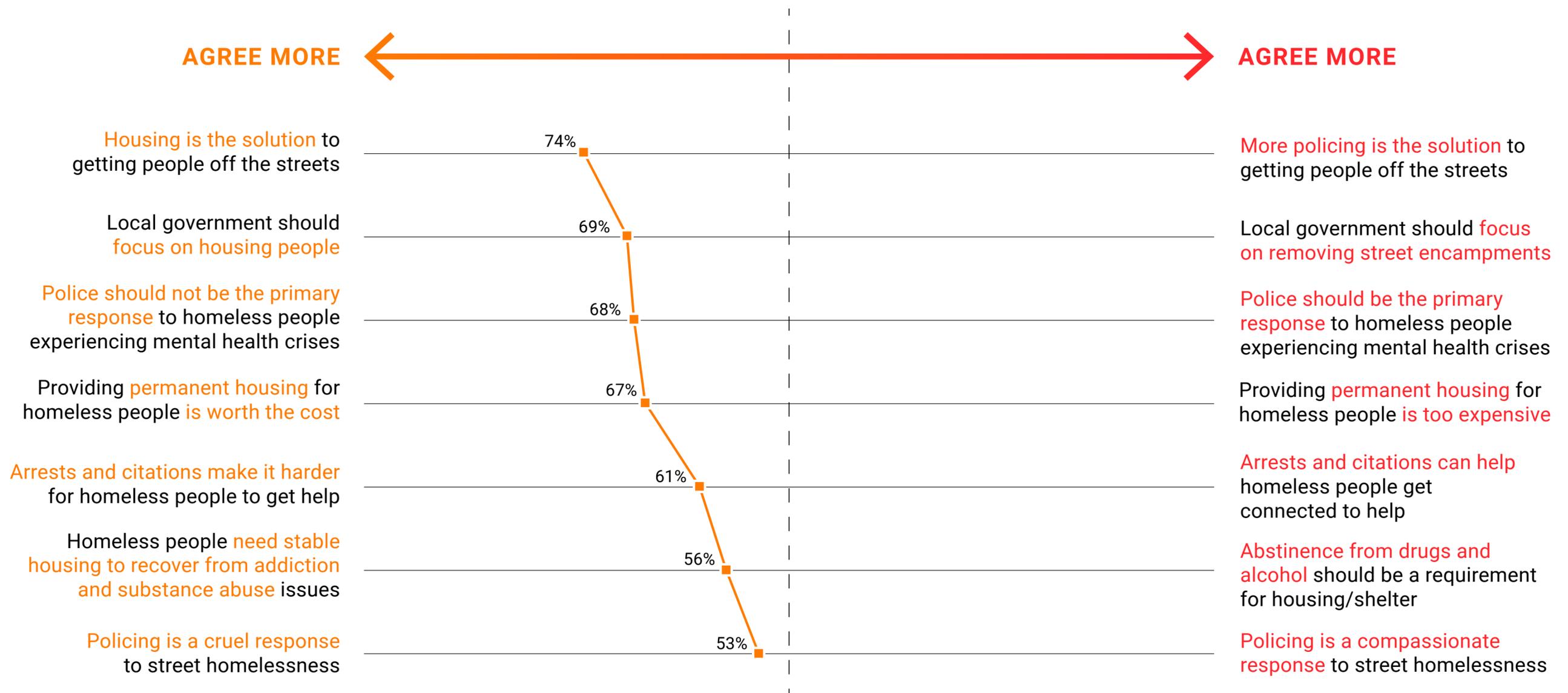
These efforts have not only resulted in harmful policies. Along the way, leaders justified these policies with rhetoric demonizing homeless people. The report continues:

**“The rhetoric that public officials use to justify these policies and practices is often dangerously dehumanizing. Without evidence, officials frame unhoused people as dangerous to housed people, particularly their children. They are condemned as a threat to public safety, and a form of blight that needs to be swept up, disappeared, and excluded from places housed people gather.”**

While advocates and service providers would prefer to focus on discussions of housing policy and helpful projects, increasingly loud calls for police action are causing real harm. They are damaging the lives and prospects of homeless people, redirecting funding from serious solutions to enforcement, and contributing to an environment of dehumanization and discrimination.

# Policing Shouldn't Be the Response

In the wake of mass protests in 2020, opinions about policing and crime feel as divided as they've ever been. However, there is a fair amount of agreement that the solution to homelessness lies in more housing, not more policing, and that housing should be the focus of local governments on homelessness. The public also agrees that providing permanent housing is worth the cost. Where there is more division is on individual police interactions – the public is split on the question of whether such interactions help or hurt homeless people. The public is evenly split on whether policing is a cruel or compassionate response to homelessness in general.



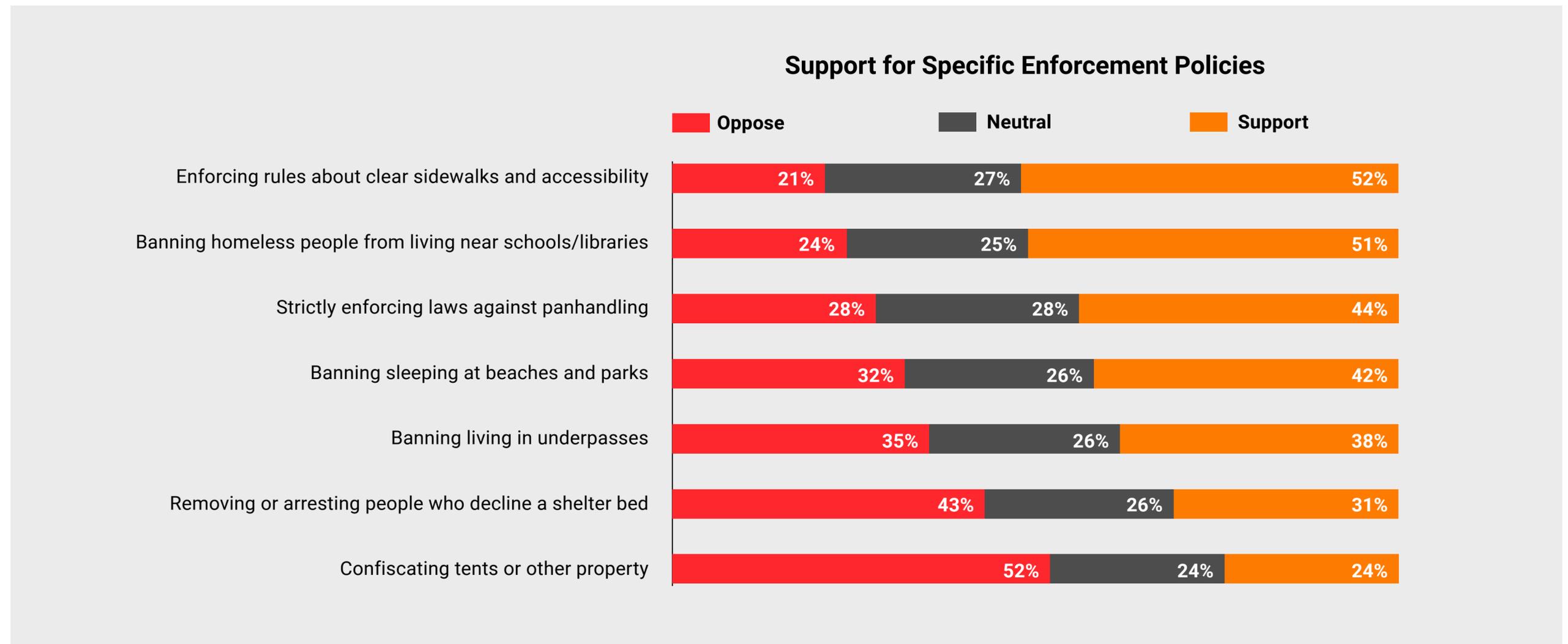
qC2: For each pair of statements below, please select which one better describes your attitudes toward policing.



# Support for Enforcement Policies Differs

Public support for enforcement measures varies significantly depending on the specific policy offered. The public is sensitive to concerns about useable sidewalks and encampments near schools, with a slight majority supporting more enforcement on these specific questions. These messages are commonly used to justify enforcement policies. Finding ways to address these concerns is a crucial task for advocates.

In contrast, the public is against policies that confiscate tents or property from homeless people, and a plurality oppose removing or arresting people who decline shelter. For advocates, this offers a messaging lesson to reframe discussions of police response around the harm done to homeless people by enforcement.



qC3: Below are a few ways that law enforcement could respond to homelessness. For each policy below, please indicate how much you support that policy.



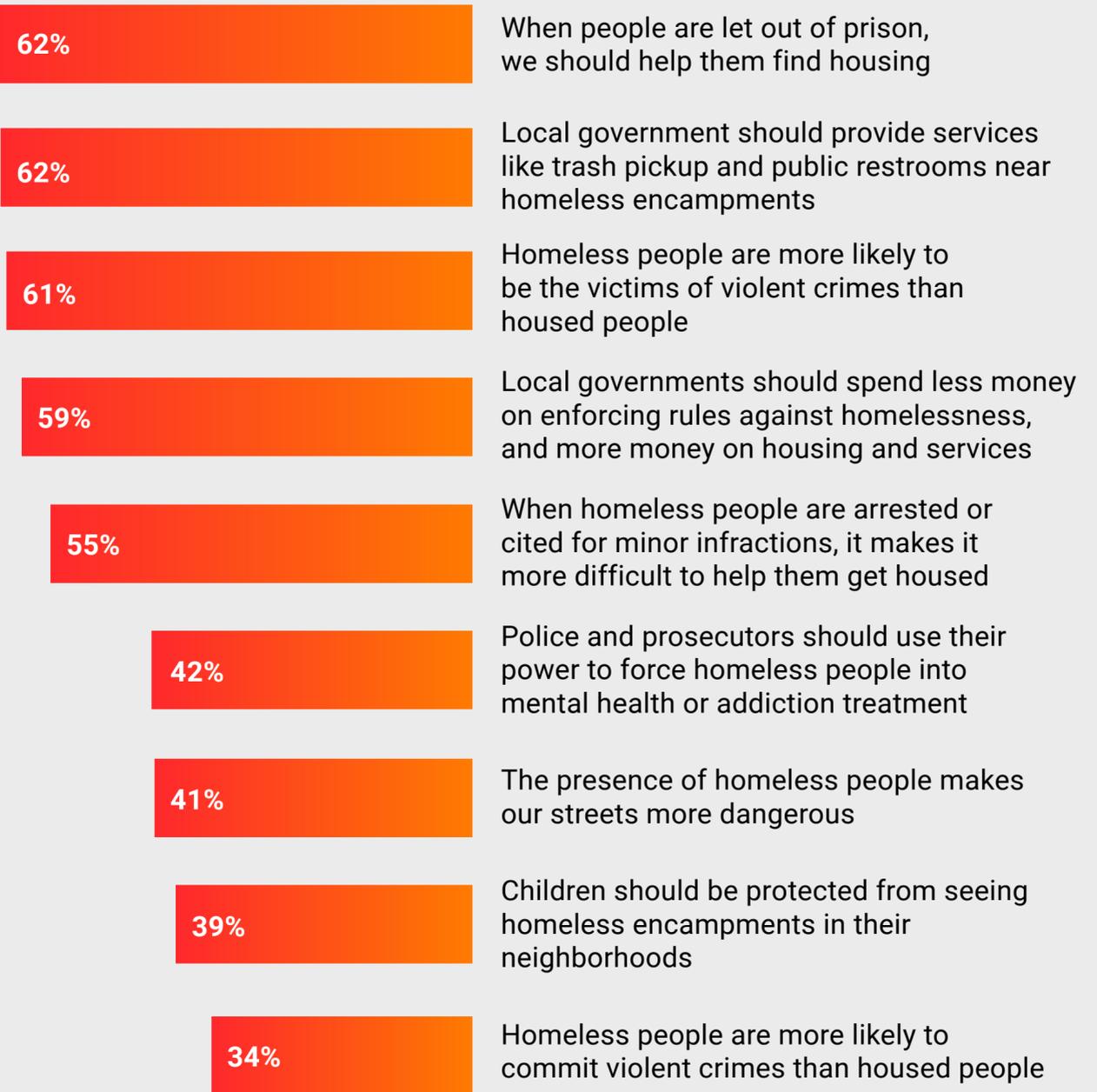
# Reframing Crime Messaging

How can advocates counter narratives that focus on crime and danger? One potential route is to focus on the need for basic services like trash pickup and restroom access. These services can help to address public concerns about health and sanitation and provide practical benefits to unsheltered people. Focusing on homeless people as likely victims of crime can also provide a strong counter-narrative to common tropes about homeless people committing crimes.

The majority of the public also believe that people released from prison deserve help securing housing, a finding that highlights the public's sympathy even for those who are convicted criminals. While the public is concerned about crime, that concern doesn't diminish the desire to see people housed.

There are also concerns about the financial side of enforcement. The majority believe that investing more in housing and services is important, even at the expense of budgets for enforcement. As cities across the country have seen sizeable movements aimed at reallocating police funding and reimagining public safety, this creates an opportunity for homelessness advocates to work in coalition across issue lines with organizations focused on policing issues.

## Criminalization Messaging AGREE/SOMEWHAT AGREE



qC4: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



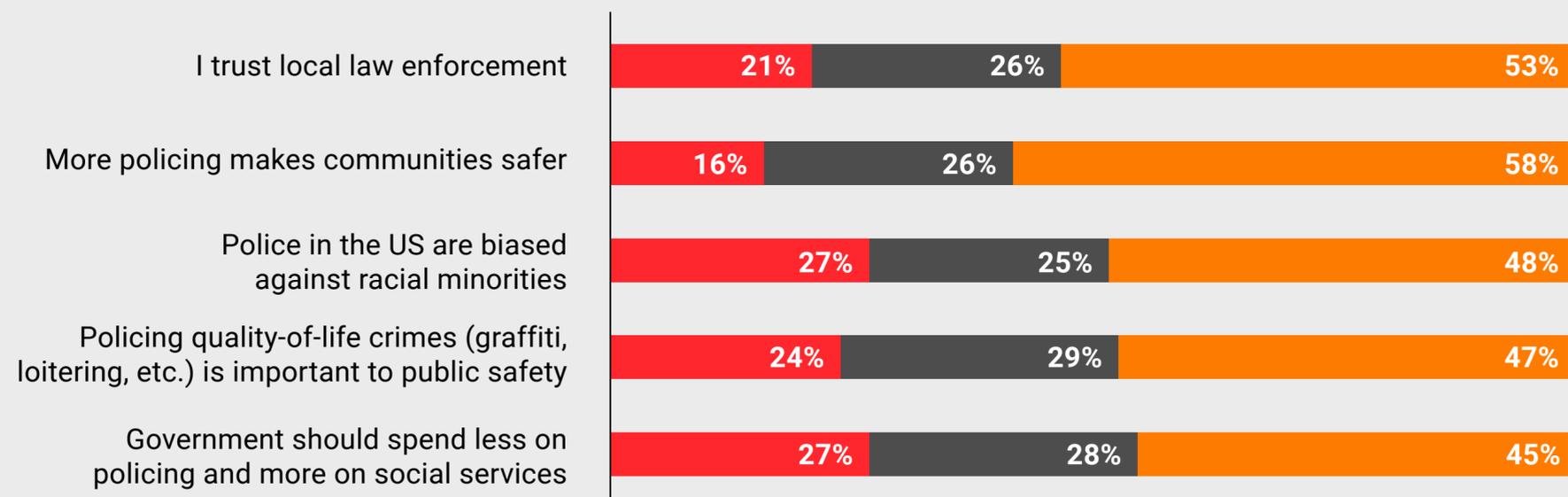
# Public Attitudes about Policing

Because criminalization and enforcement have become an outsized part of public debates about homelessness, pre-existing attitudes about crime and policing are an important part of the views people bring to discussions on homelessness. In general, trust for law enforcement remains high, and policing is seen as important to public safety. However, the public is more critical of law enforcement on questions about police funding and police bias, with a plurality believing that government should spend more on social services and that police are biased against racial minorities. As we will see, the question of police bias has a major influence on opinions around homelessness.



## Law Enforcement Attitudes

■ Disagree    
 ■ Neutral    
 ■ Agree



qC3: Below are a few ways that law enforcement could respond to homelessness. For each policy below, please indicate how much you support that policy.



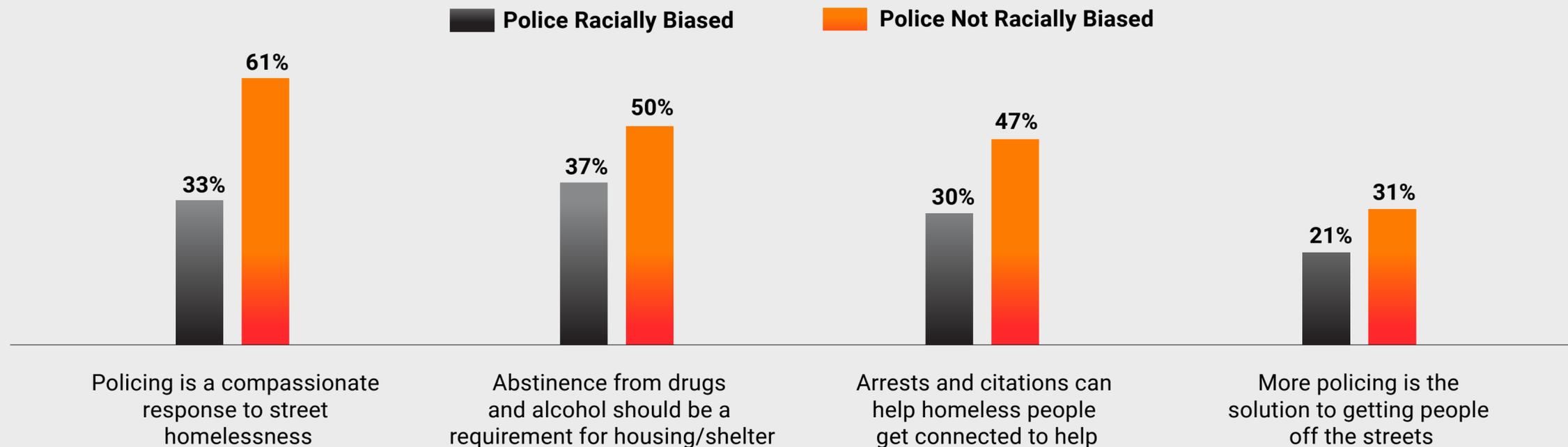
# Perceptions About Police Influence Criminalization Views

Those who believe that police are unbiased are much more likely to support police-led responses to homelessness. Compared to those who believe police are racially biased, they are nearly twice as likely to view policing as a compassionate response to homelessness, and much more likely to believe that arrests and citations are a way to get homeless people connected to services.

This is an important point for advocates to emphasize: **Police interactions make getting housed harder.**

While they are more likely to view police as a positive response, those who see the police as unbiased still favor housing as a solution to homelessness, with less than a third believing that policing is more important than housing.

## Homelessness Criminalization Attitudes BY PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE RACIAL BIAS



qC2: For each pair of statements below, please select which one better describes your attitudes toward policing.

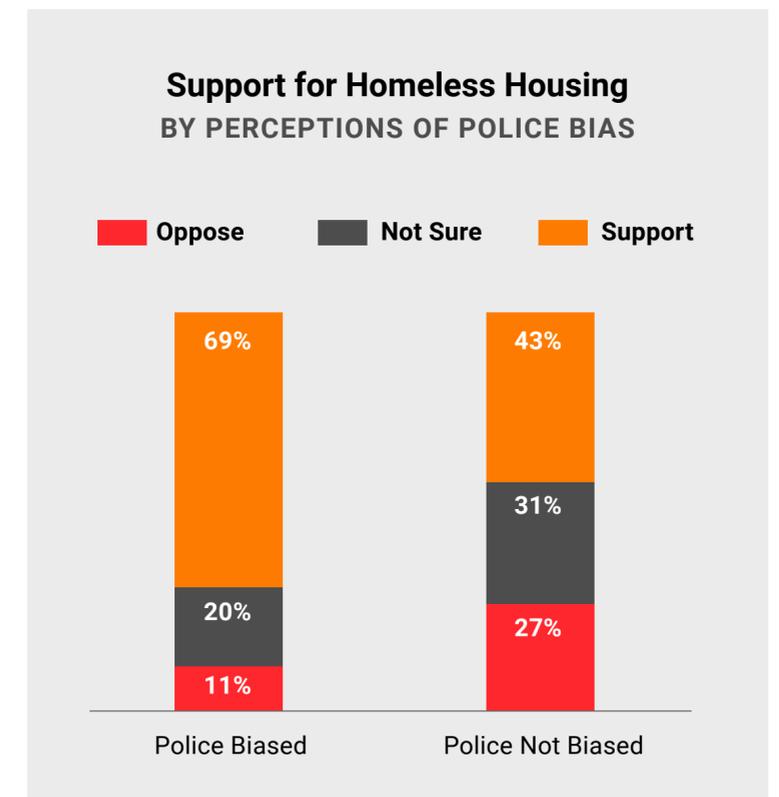
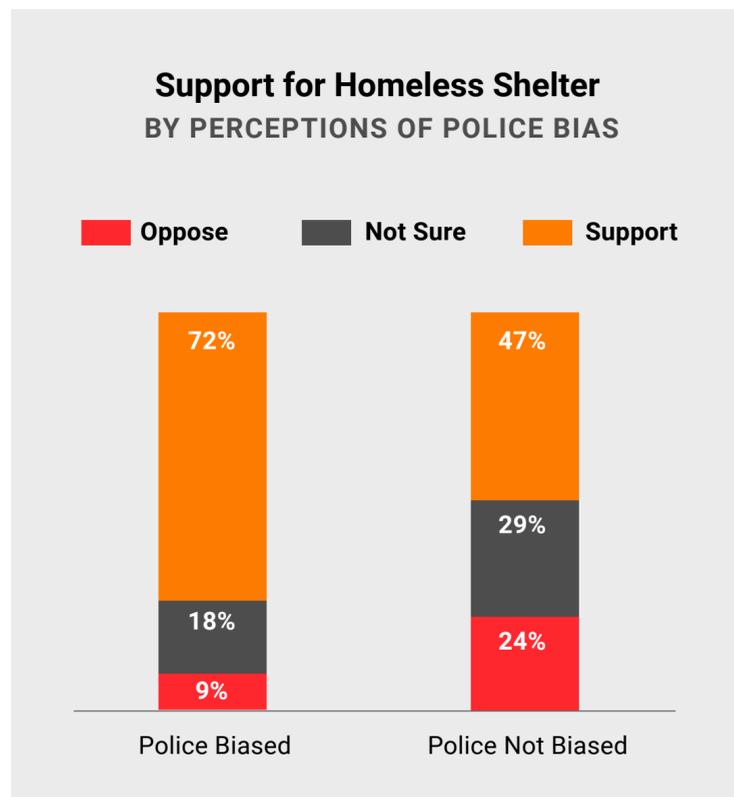


# Views on Police Intersect with Views on Housing

Views on police bias inform more than just people’s opinions on enforcement; they also correlate strongly with acceptance of shelter or housing in one’s own neighborhood. Among those who believe police are biased, there is overwhelming support for building shelter and housing. Those who believe police are unbiased are much less supportive, with fewer than half supporting such projects.

It’s tempting to view issues of race and policing as wholly separate from discussions of housing, even as discussions of these issues often overlap at the level of municipal government. But people’s opinions on housing, policing, and countless other issues don’t form in isolation. They’re part of a larger worldview that people bring to every political conversation.

For providers, advocates, and funders in the homelessness space, it’s important to be attentive to the way these issues overlap in order to be effective messengers across diverse audiences. It’s also crucial to select those audiences; these findings suggest efforts to build support for housing solutions can find organic allies in other movements and organizations fighting for justice.



QA17: If there was a plan to build a homeless housing project with on-site services in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?

QA18: If there was a plan to build a homeless shelter in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?



## Case Study: Criminalization on the Ballot

On May 1st, 2021, voters in Austin went to the polls to vote on Proposition B, a measure “making it a criminal offense... for anyone to sit, lie down, or camp in public areas and prohibiting solicitation of money or other things of value at specific hours and locations.” This measure includes two common types of homeless criminalization laws: sit-sleep-lie bans, which ban those activities in public places, and anti-panhandling ordinances, which punish soliciting money or other items from passersby.

Proposition B was a reaction to [a 2019 change that loosened Austin’s restrictions](#) on panhandling and camping. Proponents of this last measure included the local Republican party, the Chamber of Commerce, and the union representing Austin’s police officers. While a small group of [faith leaders, politicians, and other advocates fought the measure](#), supporters of the measure spent nearly \$2 million on the campaign, [outspending their opponents by a factor of roughly 10-to-1](#). This money was used to hammer home messages describing “chaos on the streets,” and portraying homelessness as a threat to businesses, tourism, and children.

Proposition B passed with 57.7% of the vote, thus reinstating Austin’s anti-camping laws. Others are now seeking to emulate Austin’s model. In Los Angeles, [a City Councilman introduced a similar ballot measure](#) as part of his ongoing campaign for Mayor. At the time of this writing, ballots are being cast on a [Denver measure allowing residents to sue the city](#) for removing encampments too slowly. Beyond these high profile initiatives, [a 2021 ACLU report](#) found that cities across southern California were using enforcement to push homeless people into remote areas, selectively applying laws to homeless people, and even targeting groups providing aid and assistance to their homeless neighbors.

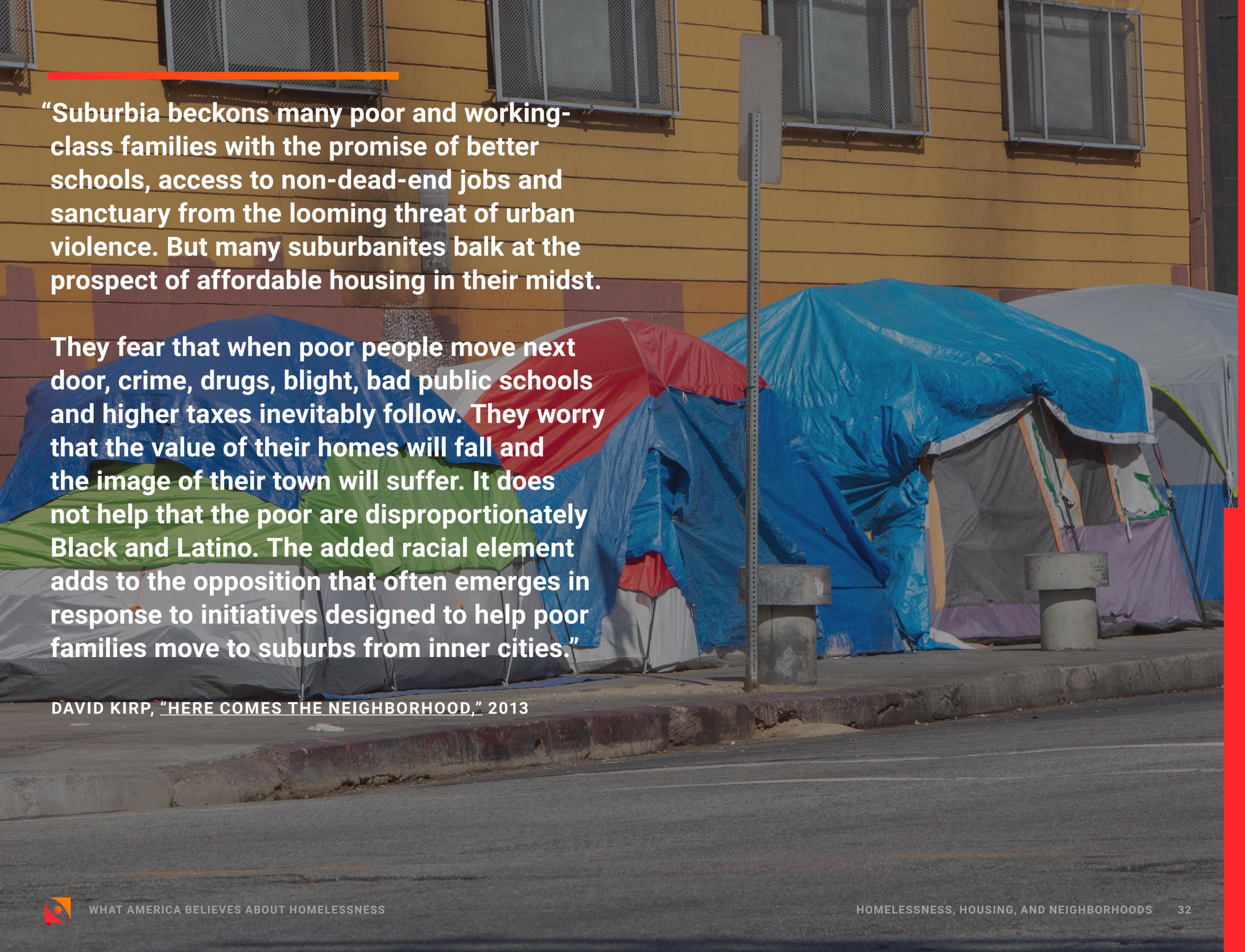
As advocates, we’re facing an uphill battle. Enforcement strategies can be effective in reducing visible homelessness by pushing people out of site, satisfying some voters’ desire to see people moved somewhere else. Messages should focus on more than just housing; advocates need to provide alternatives that speak to the needs of homeless residents and to visible problems. Expanding the availability of public restrooms and water fountains and providing additional trash receptacles provide realistic alternatives to aggressive enforcement that still speak to both the frustrations and the real public health issues created by human waste and the accumulation of refuse.

**Messages should focus on more than just housing; advocates need to provide alternatives that speak to the needs of homeless residents and to visible problems.**



# Homelessness, Housing, and Neighborhoods





**“Suburbia beckons many poor and working-class families with the promise of better schools, access to non-dead-end jobs and sanctuary from the looming threat of urban violence. But many suburbanites balk at the prospect of affordable housing in their midst.**

**They fear that when poor people move next door, crime, drugs, blight, bad public schools and higher taxes inevitably follow. They worry that the value of their homes will fall and the image of their town will suffer. It does not help that the poor are disproportionately Black and Latino. The added racial element adds to the opposition that often emerges in response to initiatives designed to help poor families move to suburbs from inner cities.”**

**DAVID KIRP, “HERE COMES THE NEIGHBORHOOD,” 2013**

# Neighborhoods, Now and in the Future

Neighborhoods are aspirational. When we think about where we want to live, we're not just imagining a house or apartment, but a place where we can make a life. To understand views on housing, it helps to look at how people view their neighborhood, and how they want it to look in the future. The most common descriptors the public used for their neighborhoods were words like "middle-class," "safe," and "nice." Only one quarter of people described their neighborhood as "affordable."

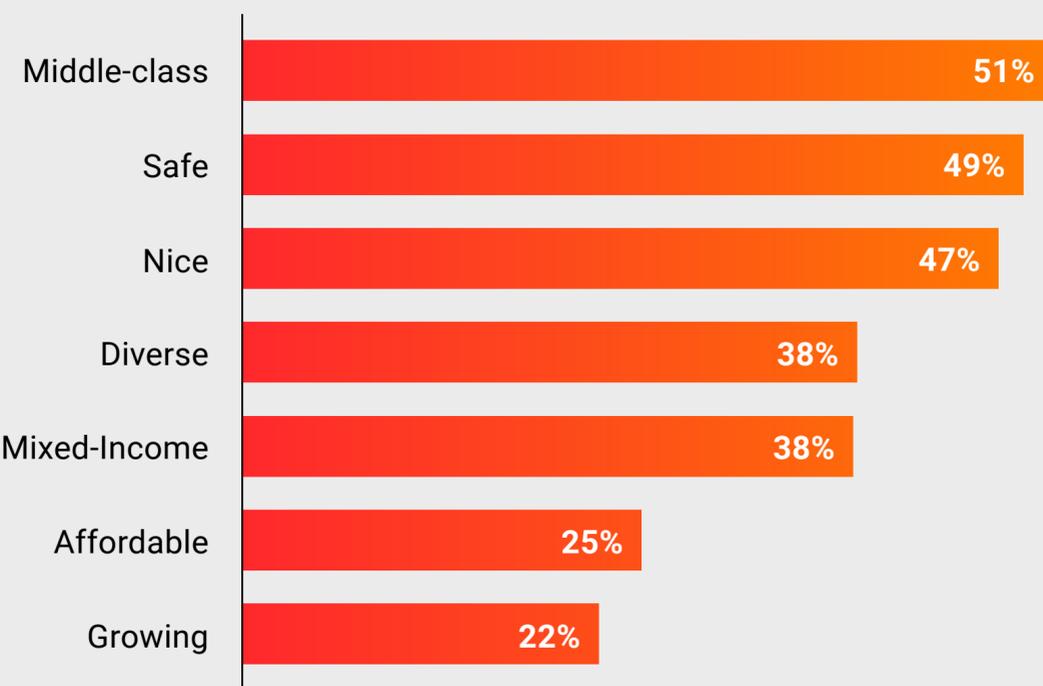
When looking toward the future, two concerns rose to the top: safety and affordability. The latter offers an opportunity for advocates to bridge the gap between discussions of homelessness and housing, and to bridge the divide between housed people and their homeless neighbors.

Diversity, both racial and economic, was a low priority. While justice demands that diversity and desegregation remain a priority in policymaking, appeals based on diversity may not be the best way to message policy changes to the general public.

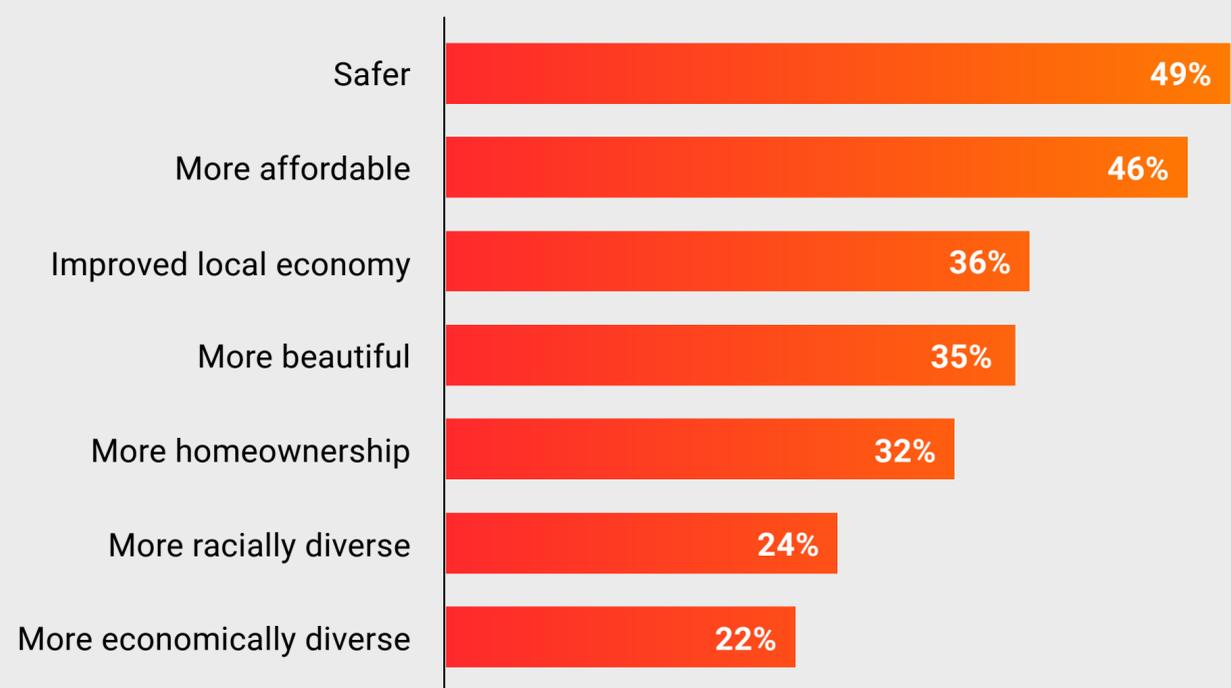
qN3: Which of the following words or phrases would you use to describe the neighborhood you currently live in?

qN5: Thinking about the future of your neighborhood, what kind of neighborhood do you want to live in? Select up to three of the following priorities that you think are most important for the future of your neighborhood.

## How Would You Describe Your Neighborhood?



## What Kind of Neighborhood Do you Want to Live In?



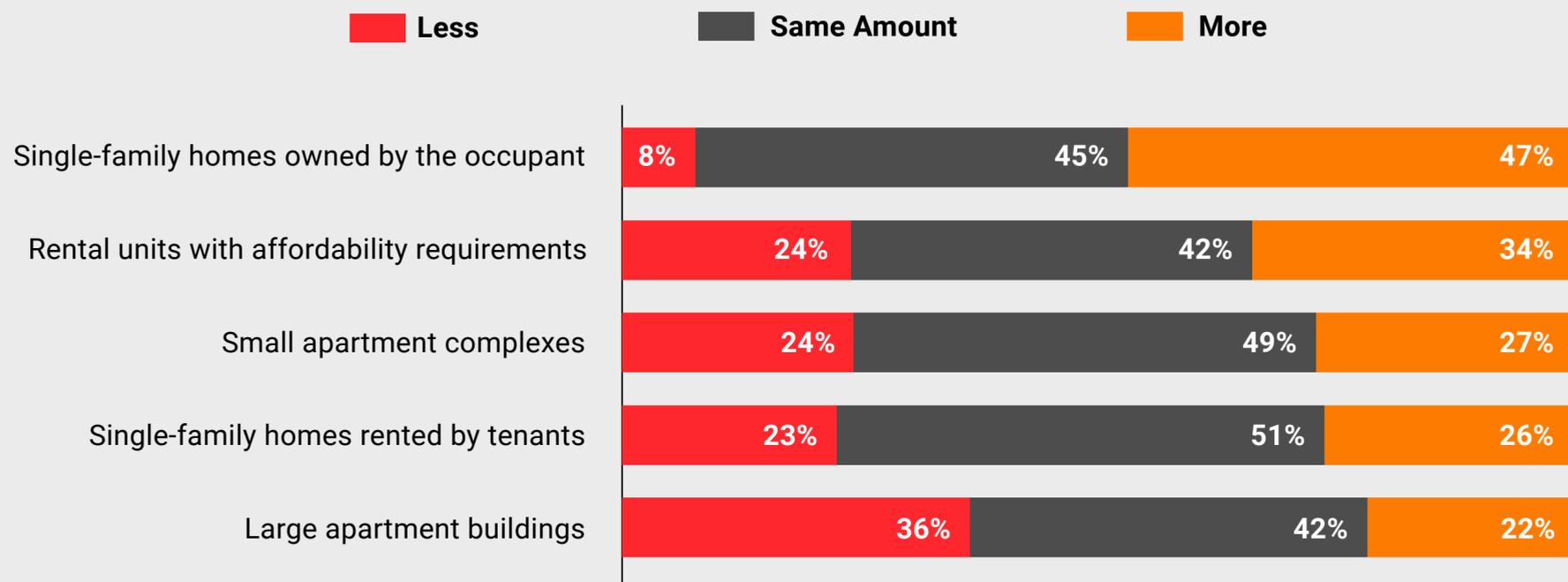
# Building the Neighborhood's Future

Public preferences around types of housing show the dream of owner-occupied single-family homes remains appealing to the public. Despite concerns about affordability, it seems that many people want to live in neighborhoods where these homes predominate. In comparison to both apartments and single-family home rentals, there's a clear preference for a traditional vision of the American Dream of home-ownership.

It's easy to see how this creates an issue for advocates of any kind of shelter or housing for homeless people, as these projects don't necessarily fit into that vision.

On a more positive note, the public is comparatively more supportive of rental units that include affordability requirements than other types of rental housing. This provides an opportunity for housing advocates, as it suggests affordability in and of itself can be a major selling point for projects aimed at providing new affordable units.

## What Type of Housing Do You Want to See In Your Neighborhood?



qN4: Thinking about the future of your neighborhood, how much of each of the following types of housing would you want your neighborhood to have?



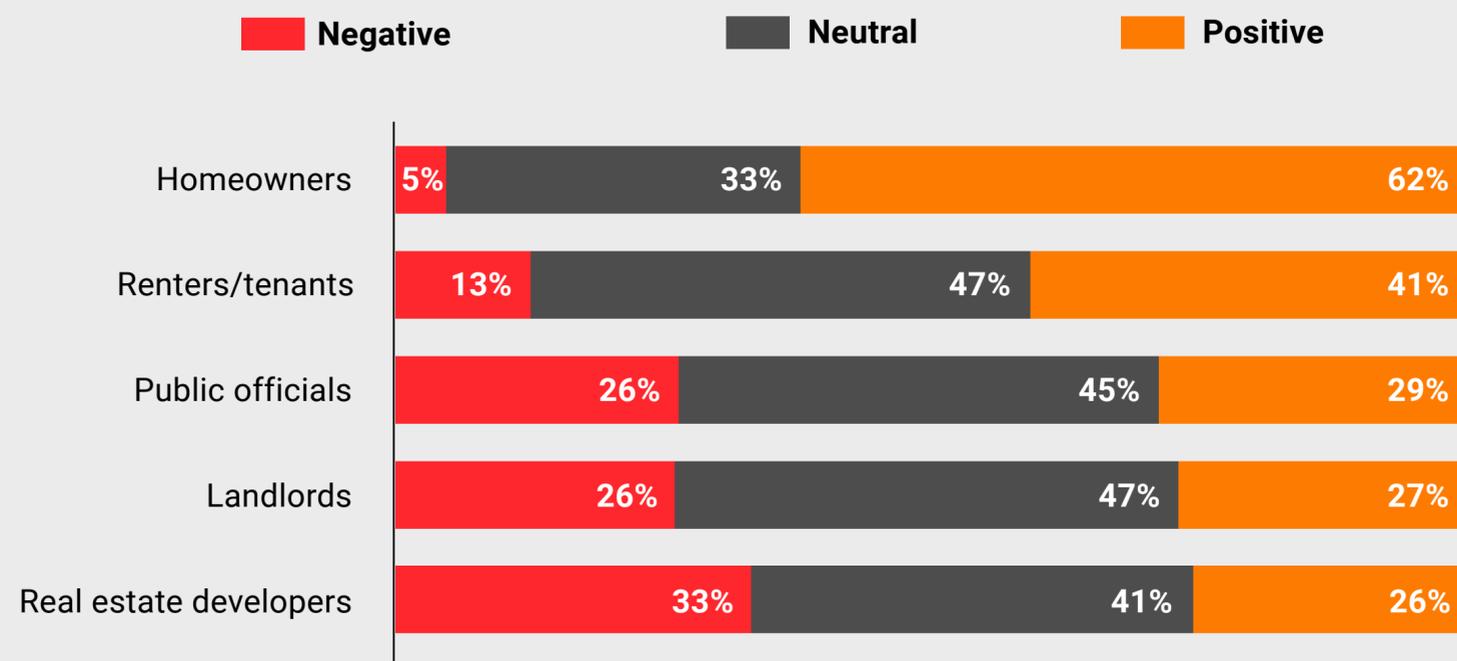
# Homeowners vs. Others

Given the preference for owner-occupied single-family home neighborhoods, it's unsurprising that homeowners are viewed much more positively than other participants in the world of housing. In contrast, renters are viewed more negatively. As with the preference for single-family homes, this preference for homeowners over tenants creates barriers to building new housing for homeless people, and to affordable housing in general. This view of homeowners as the most legitimate neighborhood stakeholders gives outsized weight to their comparatively conservative views on homelessness.

Negative views of public officials and real estate developers add to this dilemma, as their involvement in new housing can be leveraged against those projects.



**Housing Actor Attitudes**



qN6: Below are a few different types of people or organizations that are involved in housing. How positive or negative are your attitudes toward each of the following?



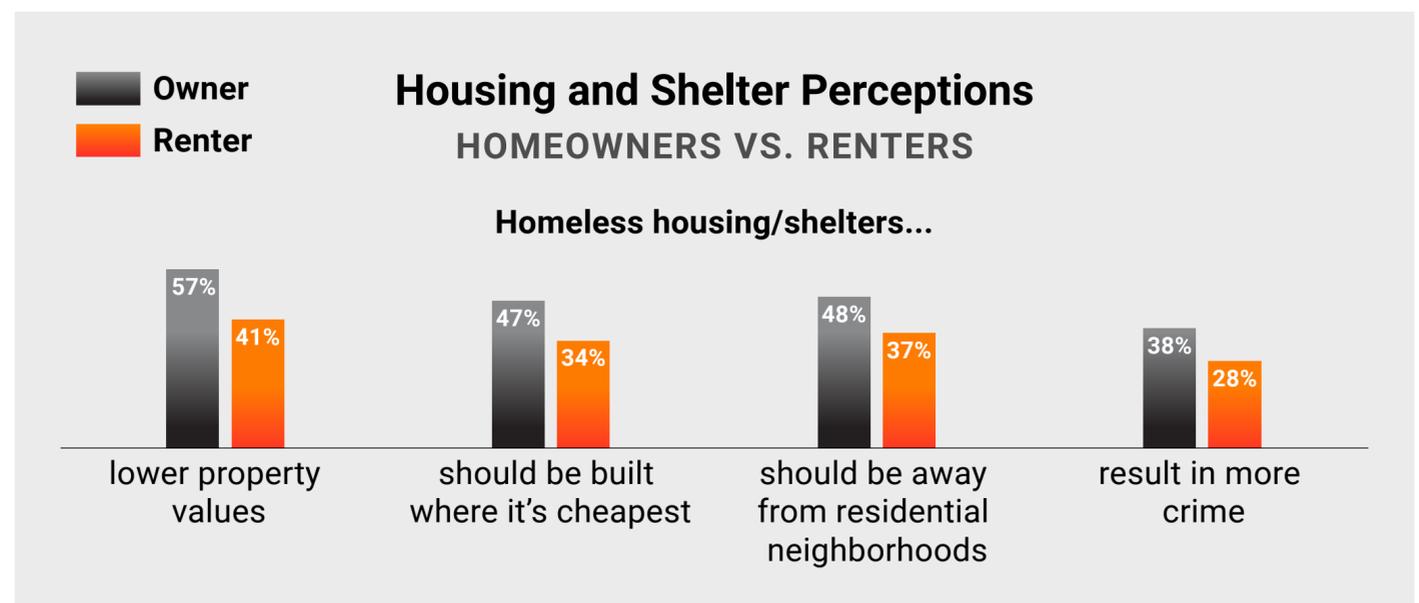
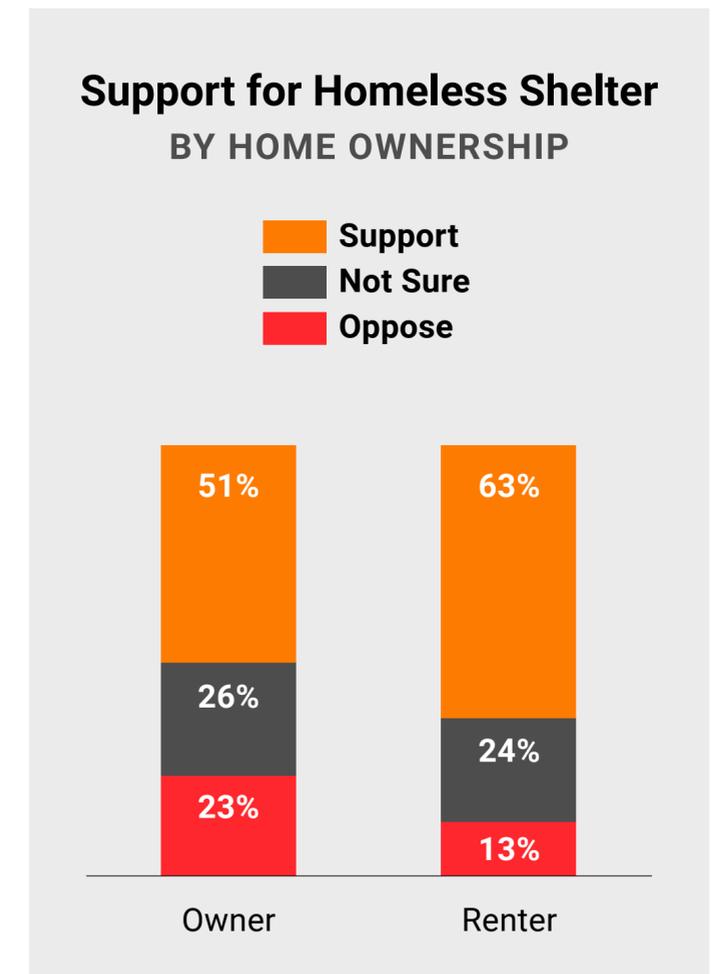
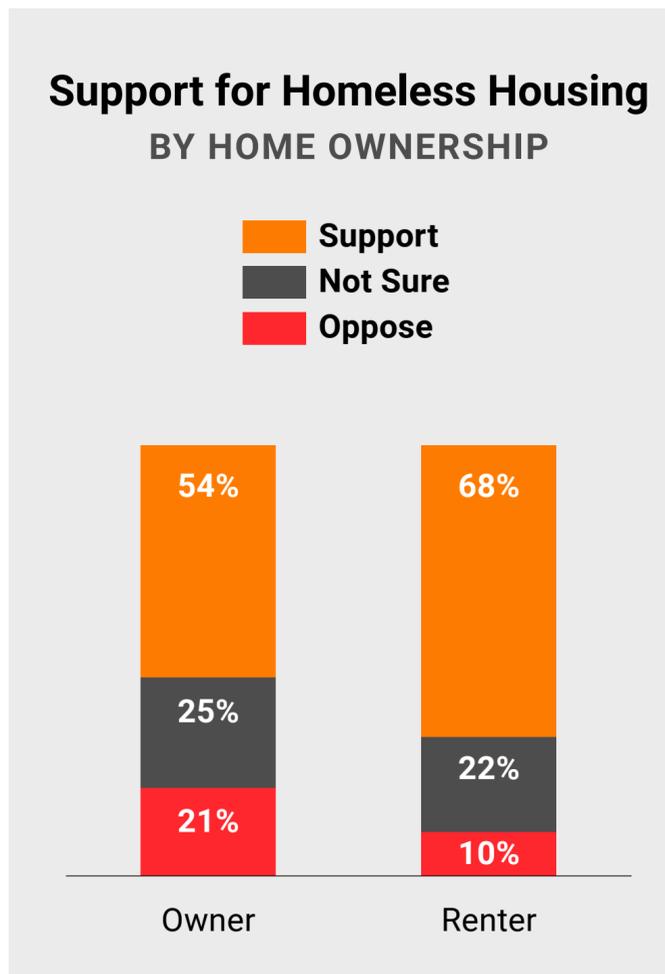
# Homeowners are Less Supportive of Local Solutions

The strong public preference for single-family homeowners can give their views an outsized weight in political discussions. Unfortunately, their views are often at cross-purposes to those of advocates. Compared to renters, homeowners have more negative views of housing and shelter projects.

In their own neighborhoods, homeowners are about twice as likely to oppose shelter or housing when compared to renters, and significantly less supportive (though a slim majority say they support these projects).

More specifically, owners expressed much stronger concerns about crime and property values, and were more likely to believe that shelter and housing should be located in cheaper, non-residential areas. These location-specific concerns help to explain the gap between broad public support for projects and the strong opposition they often face.

These are also messages that advocates need to be prepared to counter as they fight to site projects in the face of neighborhood opposition, which is often led by organized homeowner groups.



QA17: If there was a plan to build a homeless housing project with on-site services in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?

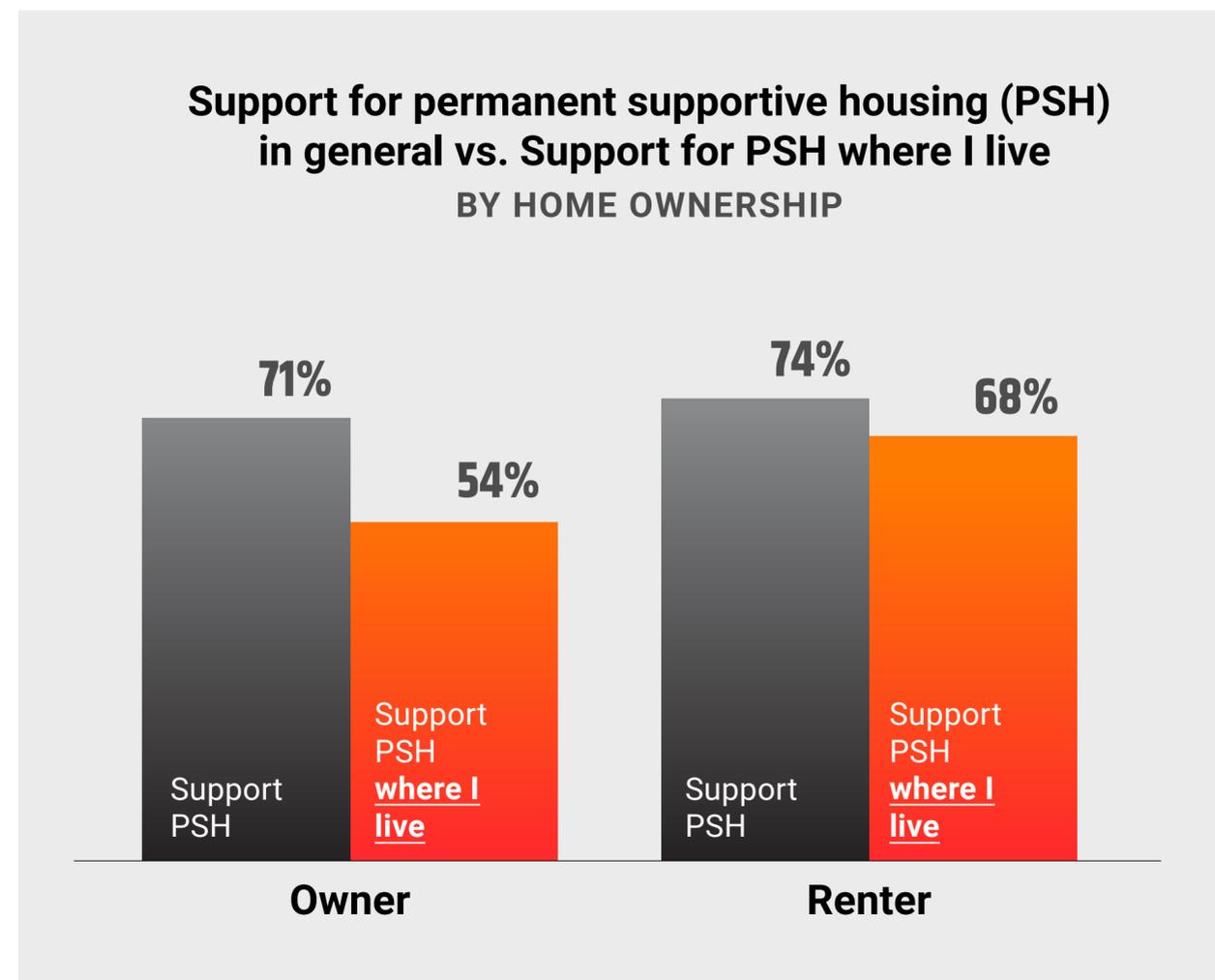
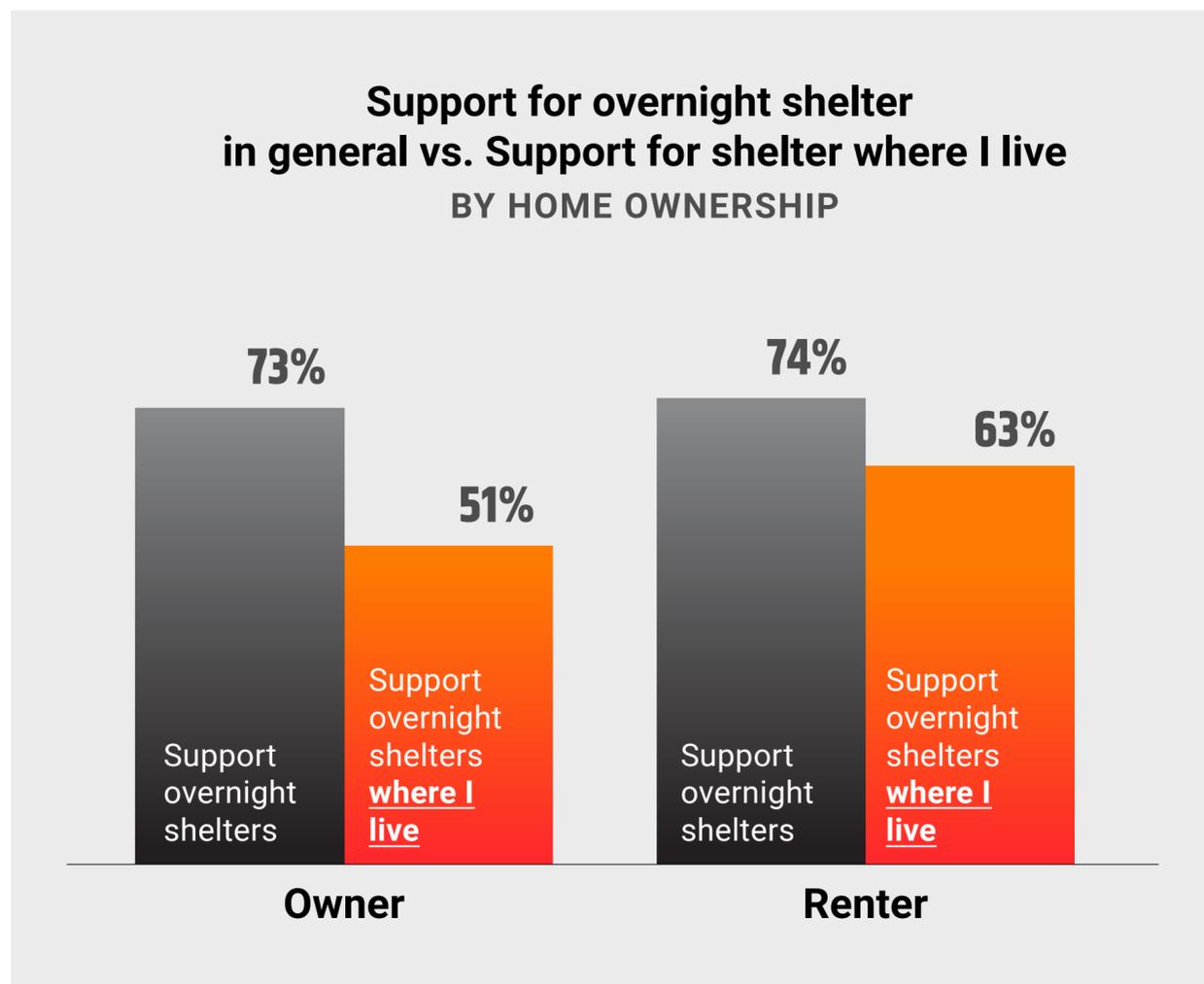
QA18: If there was a plan to build a homeless shelter in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?

qA21: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about housing and shelters for homeless people?



# Homeownership and NIMBYism

“Not In My Backyard” sentiment (NIMBYism) plays an important role in the politics of homelessness, driving neighborhood-level resistance that can disrupt or kill important projects. While people may be supportive of housing and shelter in the abstract, when it comes to their own neighborhood they express more ambivalence. This difference is especially apparent among homeowners, who are roughly as likely as renters to support projects in the abstract, but are much less likely than renters to support those projects in their own neighborhoods. This plays out in the real world, as ballot measures that increase taxes to fund homelessness pass with clear majorities, but the projects they fund often face fierce opposition at the neighborhood level.



qA15: Below are a few policies that local governments might implement to address homelessness. For each policy below, please indicate how much you support that policy.

qA17: If there was a plan to build housing for homeless people with on-site services in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?

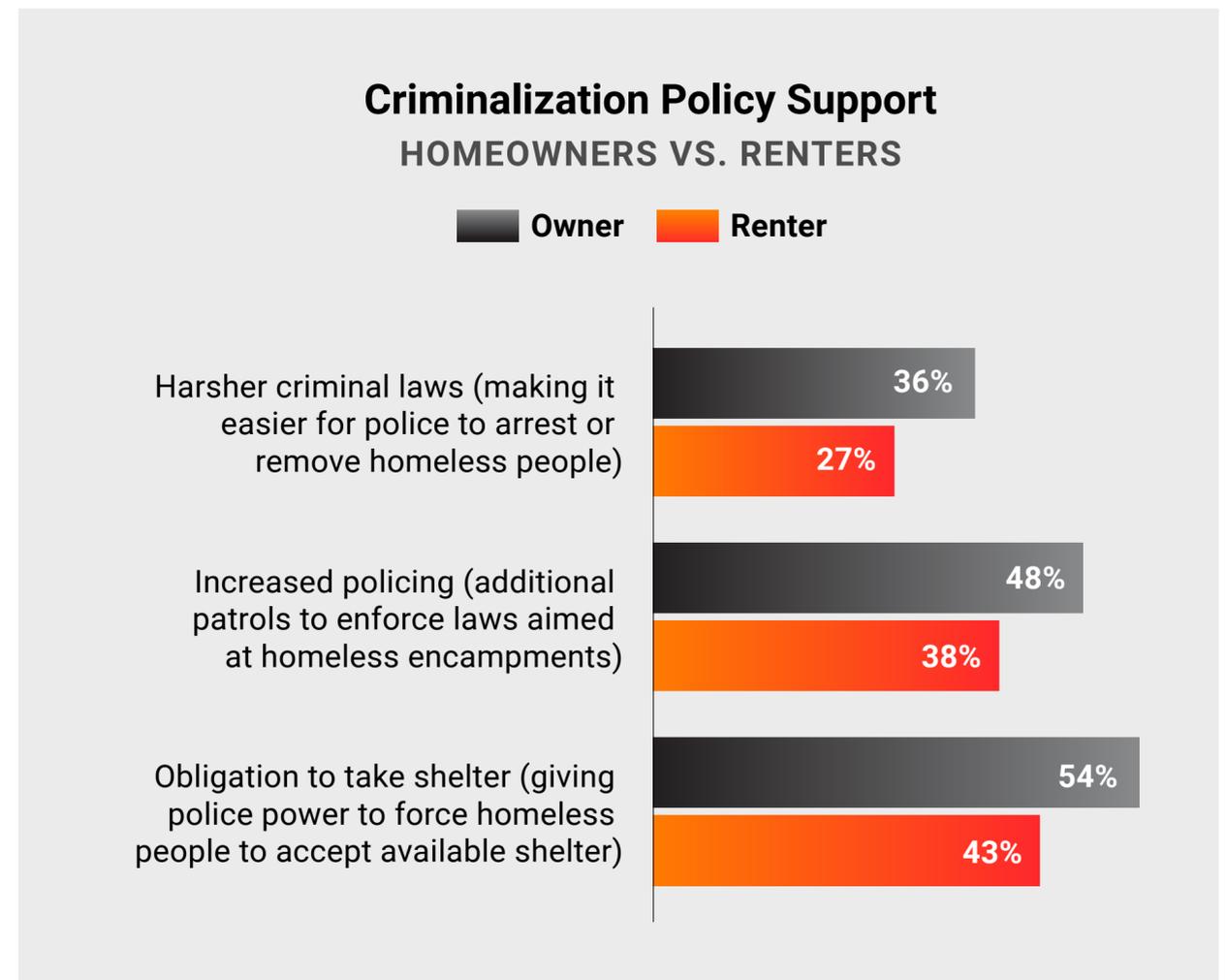
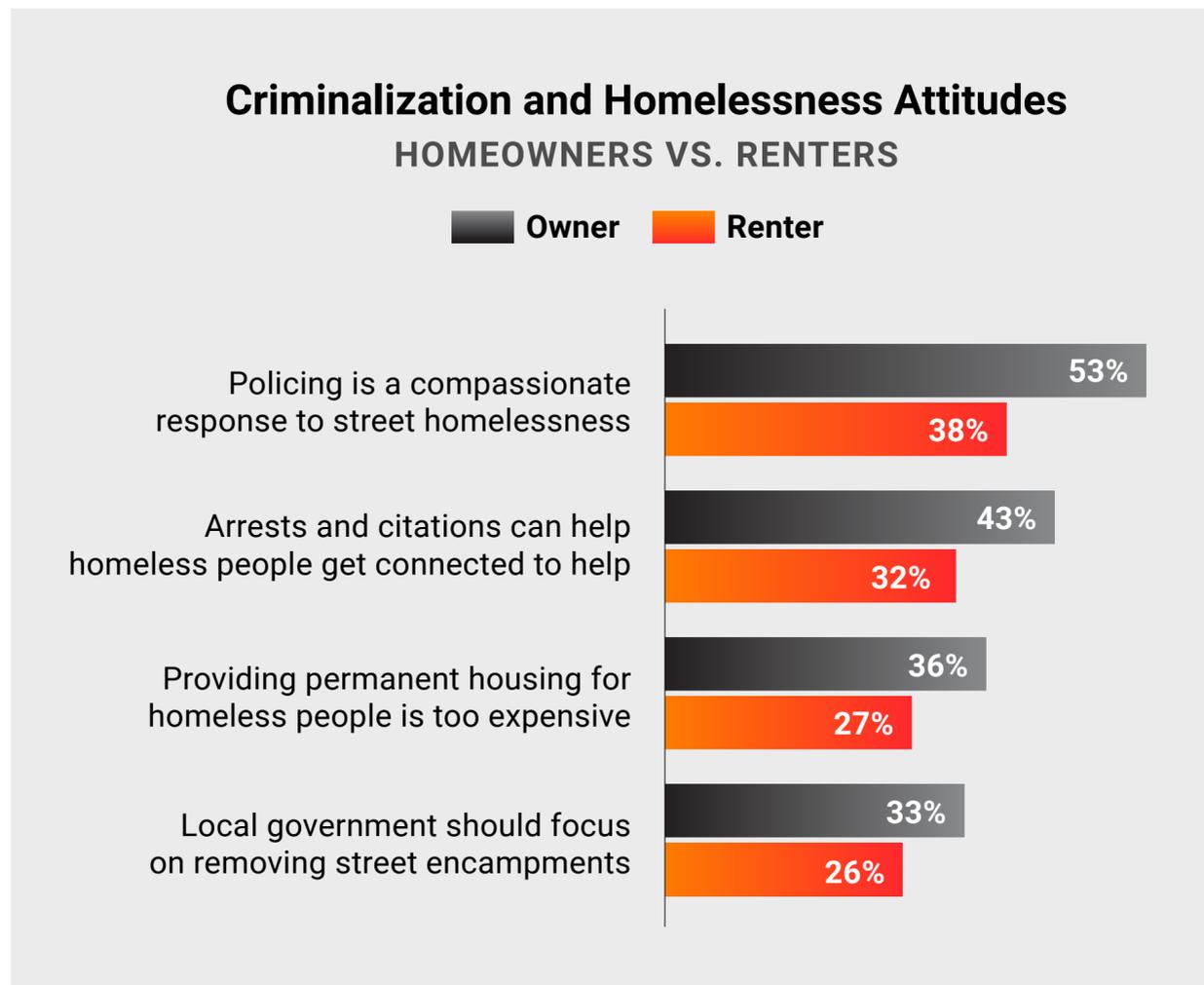
qA18: If there was a plan to build a homeless shelter in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?



# Homeowners are More Supportive of Criminalization

Homeowners are also differentiated from renters in their views on crime and policing. More homeowners trust police as a compassionate response to homelessness, and are more likely to view involvement with the criminal justice system as an entry point for services. They also have more concerns about the price of permanent housing as a solution to homelessness.

These attitudes are also expressed through policy positions. Homeowners are more likely to support harsher criminal laws, increased policing, and forcing people to take shelter.



qC2: For each pair of statements below, please select which one better describes your attitudes toward policing.

qA15: Below are a few policies that local governments might implement to address homelessness. For each policy below, please indicate how much you support that policy.



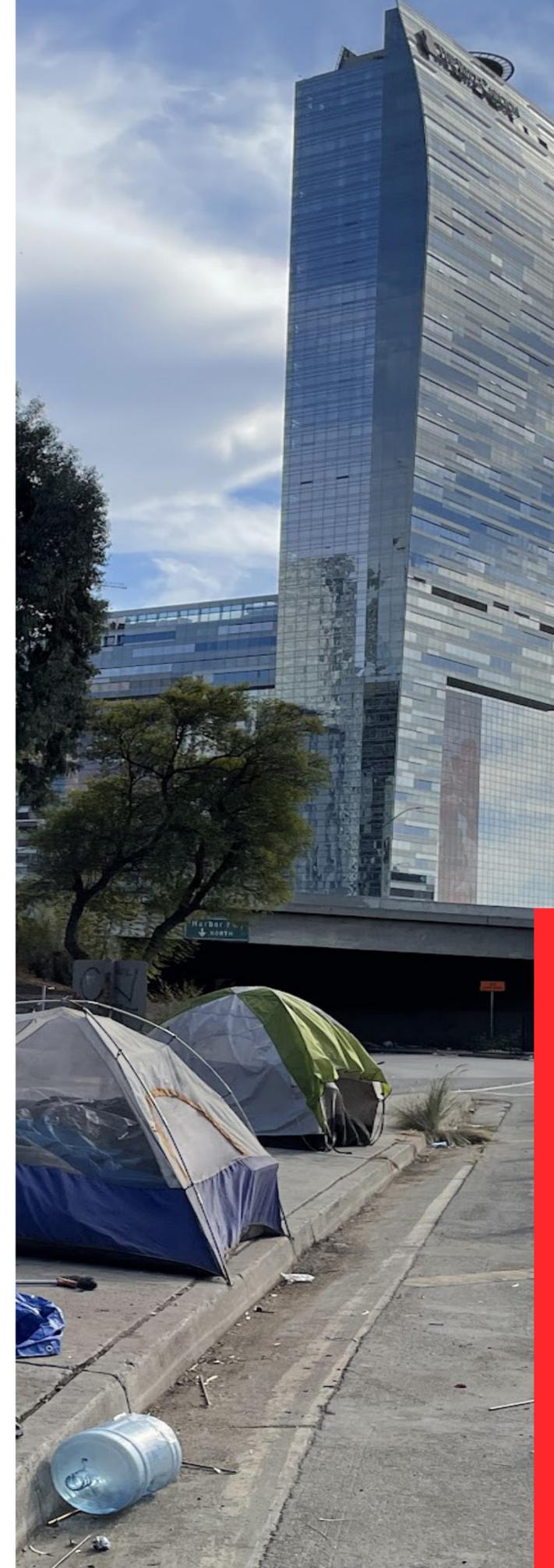
## Case Study: Homeowners' Associations

Local neighborhood opposition is a major barrier facing cities when they attempt to site shelter or housing. Most often, it seems that this pushback is led by homeowners' associations (HOAs). News accounts frame these stories as battles between aggrieved residents and uncaring city officials. Examples include:

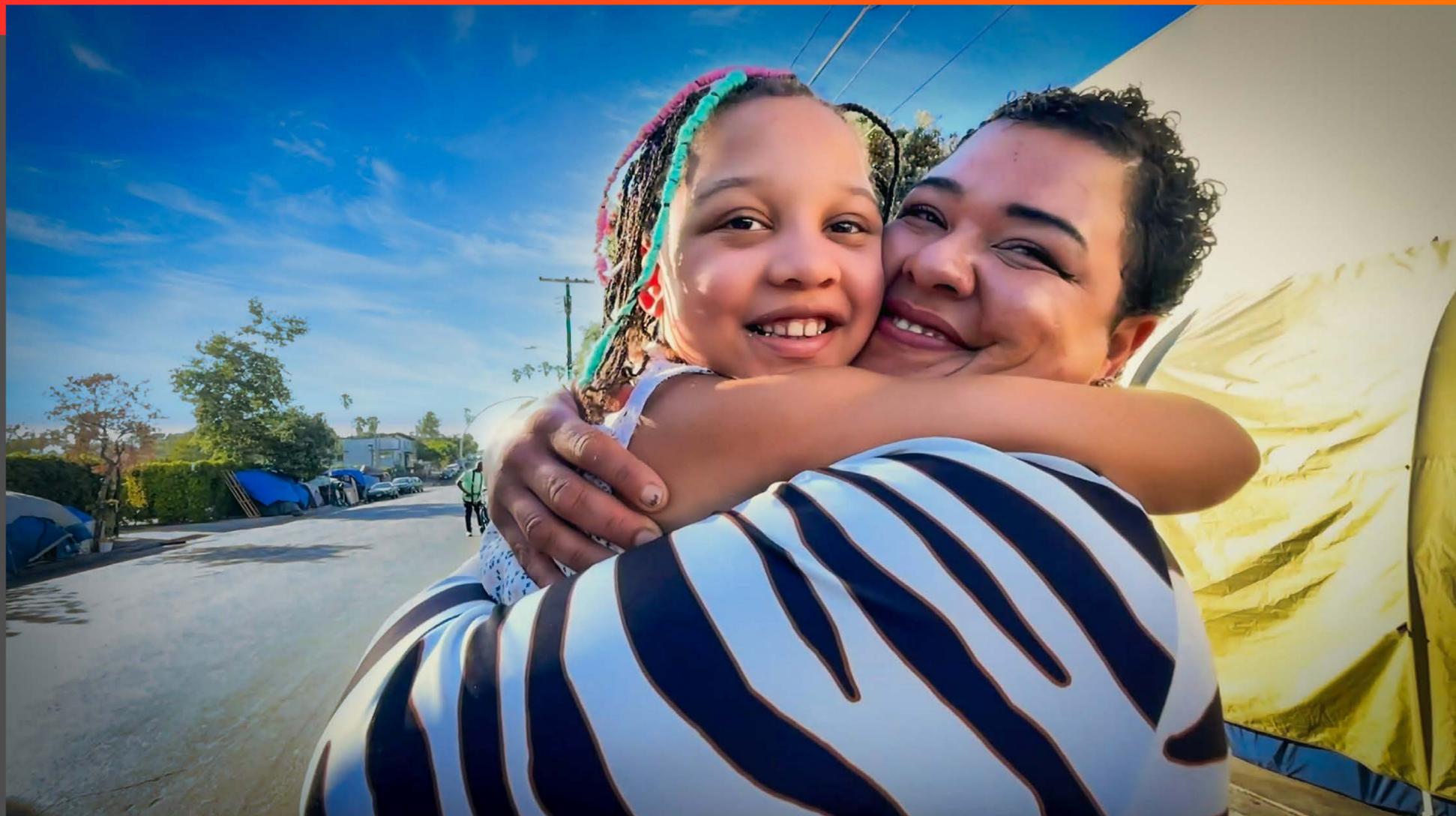
- In Springfield, IL, [homeowners from the Pioneer Park](#) neighborhood cited loitering and safety concerns over a proposed access center, describing the facility as making “homelessness... the burden of east side homeowners.” The organization planning the project was forced to [abandon their plans](#) in the face of this opposition.
- In Los Angeles, CA, the association representing [condo residents at the downtown Ritz-Carlton](#) Hotel opposed leasing underutilized rooms to the city's Project Roomkey program, which provided hotel rooms to homeless people during the pandemic. The hotel ultimately declined to participate in the program.
- In Honolulu, HA, [the Institute for Human Services received funding](#) for homeless and affordable housing through the CARES act, a pandemic relief program. In multiple neighborhoods, local opposition from homeowner groups forced the organization to abandon their plans. They were ultimately unable to spend the money before the program's deadline, and as a result abandoned the funding.
- In Edmonton, ON, a local homeowners' association [spent \\$35,000 on a lawsuit](#) to fight a 60-unit permanent supportive housing project. As one resident put it, "I think there's way too many little kids in the area and I already think there's enough crime that goes on in this area and we don't need any more added to it."

Tactics used by HOAs in other cities across the country include [lawsuits](#), [protests](#), and [recall campaigns](#) against local officials. Residents go beyond the usual rhetoric about safety, citing more creative concerns about [traffic](#), the [environment](#), and [building size](#) as reasons to oppose projects.

Homeowners are held in high esteem by politicians and others, and are often highly organized. Moreover, homeowner organizations are often the voices most directly engaging local residents on the issue of homelessness. HOAs are your neighbors, not a distant public official or unfamiliar nonprofit organization. For advocates, service providers, and politicians, overcoming this barrier requires cultivating community support and finding ways to uplift the voices of more supportive neighbors. While fact sheets and townhalls are an important part of this, engagement must go deeper. While some residents will always oppose these projects, building in-neighborhood relationships provides opportunities to dispel myths about homelessness authentically and speak to how housing and shelter can address neighbors' concerns about safety and sanitation.



# Homelessness, Race, and Racism



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“Most minority groups, especially African Americans and Indigenous people, experience homelessness at higher rates than whites, largely due to long-standing historical and structural racism.

The most striking disparity can be found among African Americans, who represent 13 percent of the general population but account for 39 percent of people experiencing homelessness and more than 50 percent of homeless families with children. This imbalance has not improved over time.”

NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS,  
“HOMELESSNESS AND RACIAL DISPARITIES,” 2020



## Race and Homelessness

Race and racism are structural features of American life, shaping our experiences and worldviews. As discussed earlier, race plays a central role in the past and present of housing, homelessness, and poverty. As the [Urban Institute](#) writes:

***“Structural racism continues to disproportionately segregate communities of color from access to opportunity and upward mobility by making it more difficult for people of color to secure quality education, jobs, housing, healthcare, and equal treatment in the criminal justice system.”***

These systemic issues also shape how we view the world. Who do we want (or not want) in our communities? Who are we empathetic toward, and who do we scorn? How generous should we be when our neighbors fall on hard times? While race is only one part of the answer to these questions, it’s a key factor in discussions of homelessness – an issue at the intersection of poverty, neighborhoods, and policing.

In the survey data, race made a big difference in how people view homelessness. Black respondents, who were more likely to have personal experiences with housing insecurity, expressed more supportive views toward homeless people and the expansion of homeless services. White respondents held more pro-carceral views. These differences reflect broader societal discussions, mirroring the push-and-pull of progress and backlash that has recurred throughout the history of movements for racial justice.

### A NOTE ON ETHNICITY DATA:

Where possible, we have broken out results for Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian American/Pacific-Islander respondents. Due to low base size (n = 46), Native American/American Indian respondent data has not been broken out. When cutting by other metrics (homeownership, religiousness), we’ve reported white vs. non-white respondents in order to have statistically reliable samples for comparison.

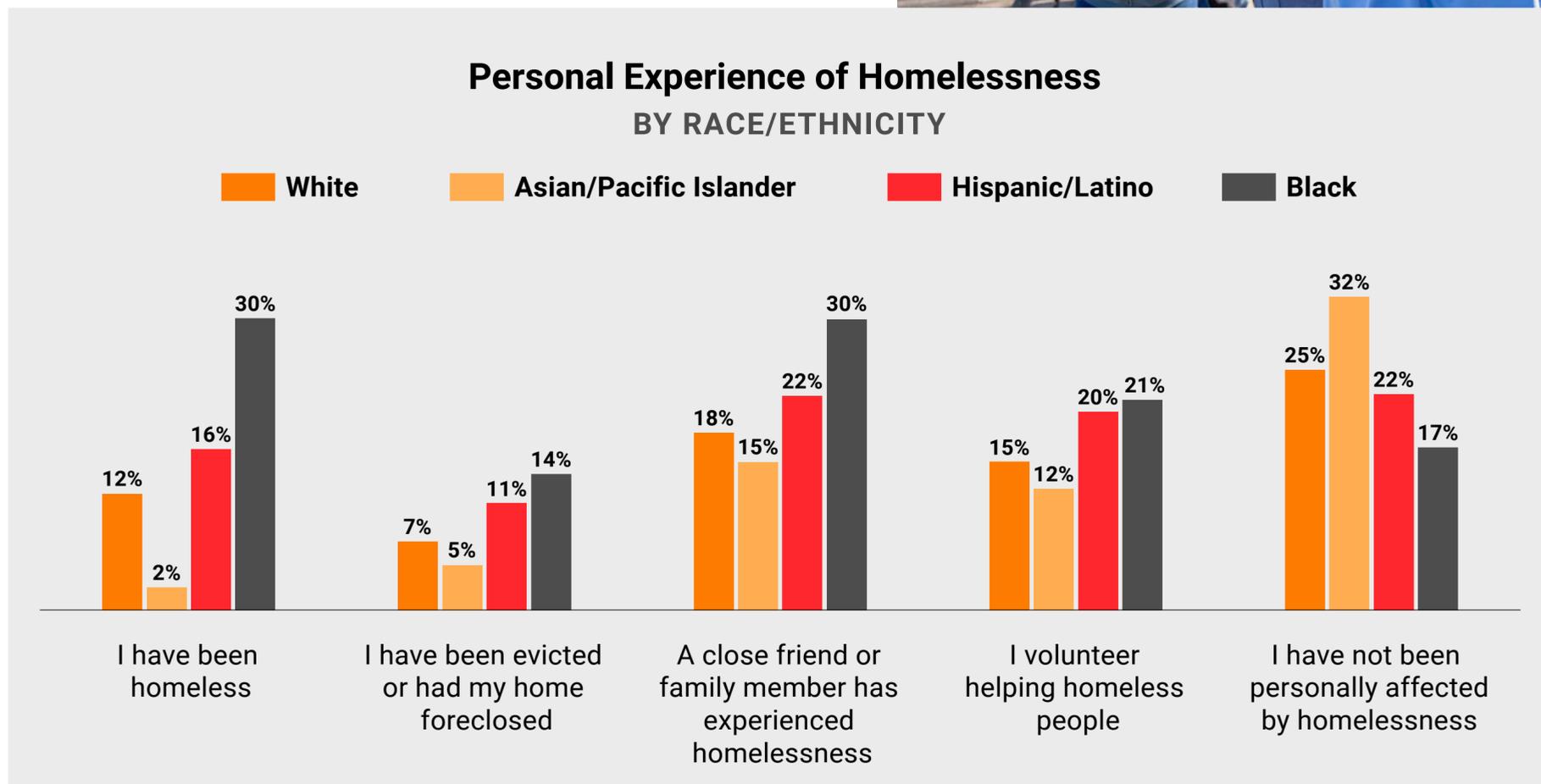


# Race, Ethnicity, and Experiences with Homelessness

A key link between ethnicity and opinions about homelessness is personal experience. Black respondents in particular are much more likely to have experienced homelessness, eviction, or had a friend or family member experience homelessness. White and Asian Americans are much less likely to report personal experiences with homelessness or homeless people. This data is an important reminder of the structural role race plays in American life, as different communities come to housing and homelessness issues with different lived experiences and perspectives.



© Jay Janner – USA TODAY NETWORK



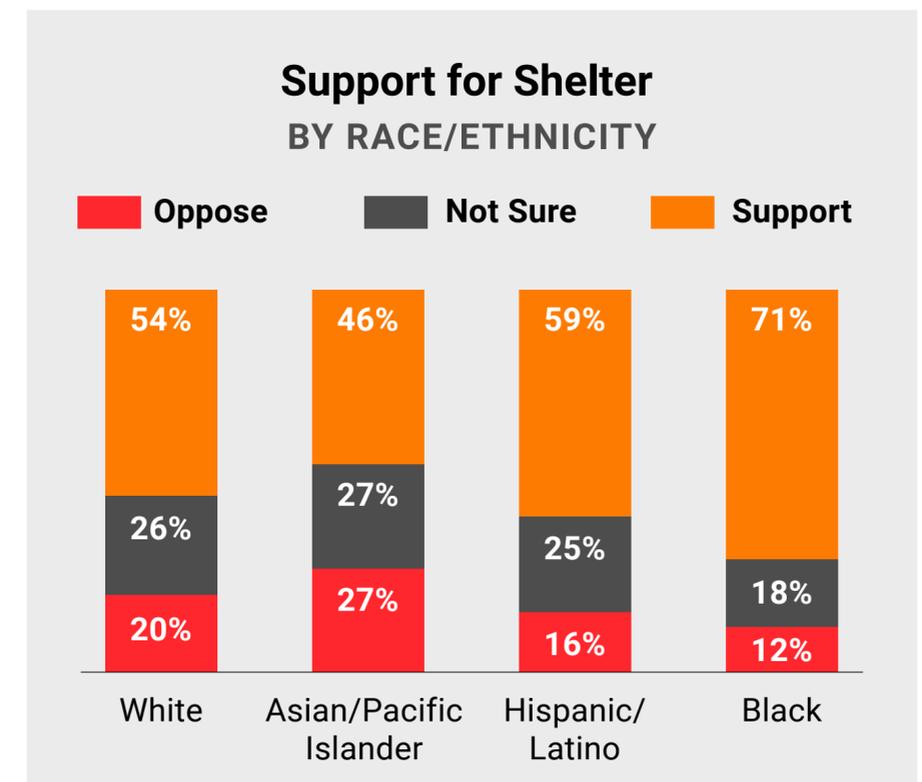
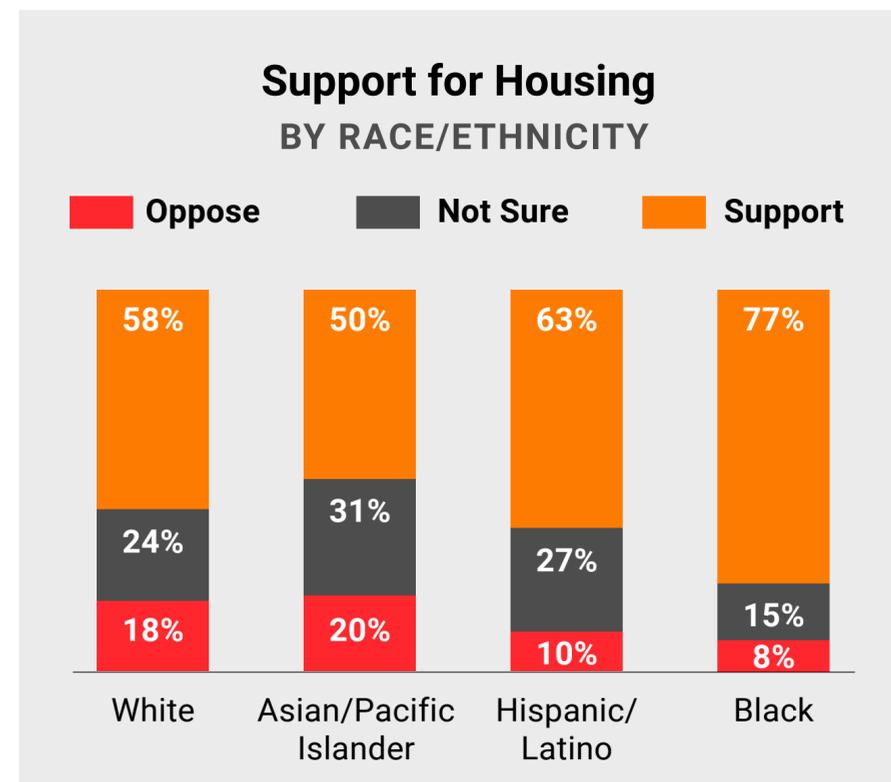
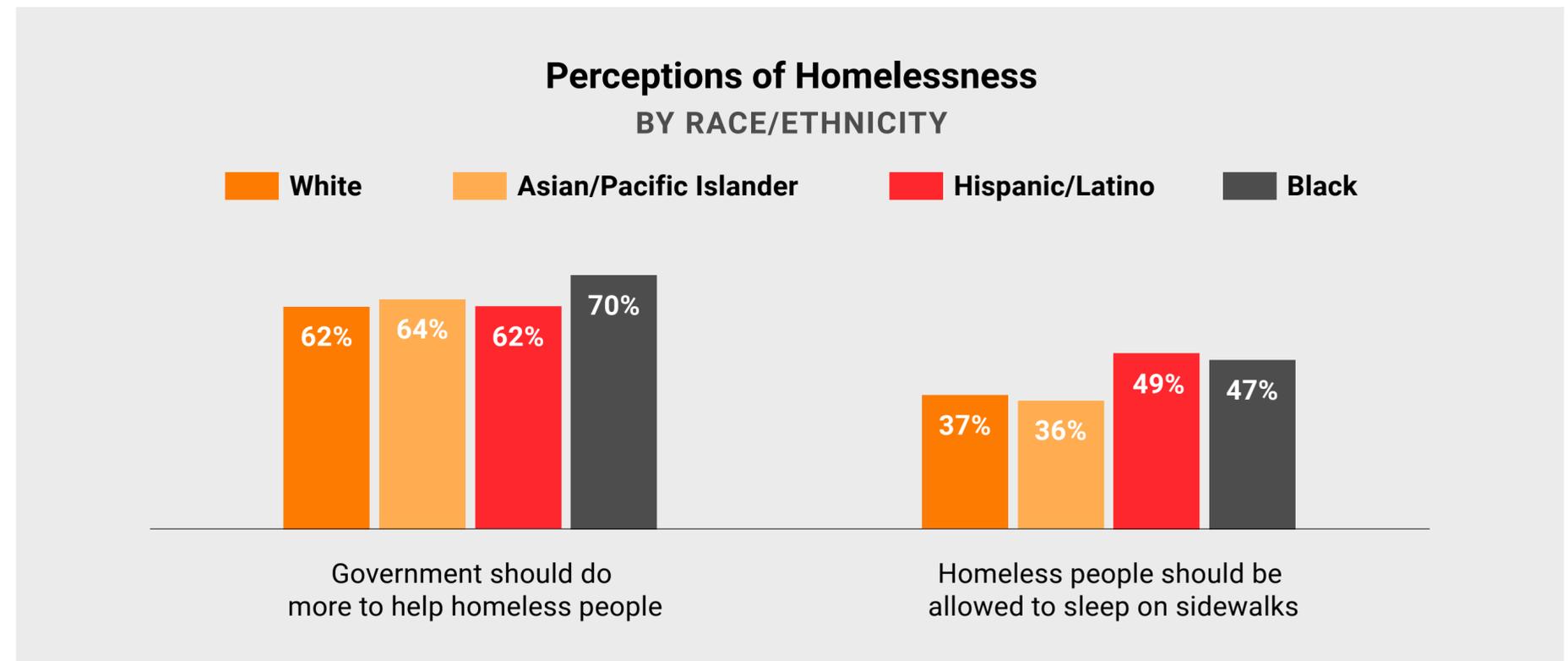
qA5: People have a number of different experiences related to homelessness. Which of the following statements describe your personal experience with homelessness?



# Project Support by Race/Ethnicity

The impacts of these experiences are reflected in broader views on homelessness. Black people are more supportive of government intervention, and hold less punitive views toward people currently experiencing homelessness.

There's a similar pattern in support for housing and shelter in one's own neighborhood. White and Asian respondents are supportive, but less so than Hispanic/Latino respondents, and much less so than Black respondents. Both support and opposition follow this same pattern.



qA17: If there was a plan to build housing for homeless people with on-site services in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?

qA18: If there was a plan to build a homeless shelter in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?

QA9A: For each pair of statements below, please select which one better describes your feelings about homelessness.



# Policing Attitudes by Race/Ethnicity

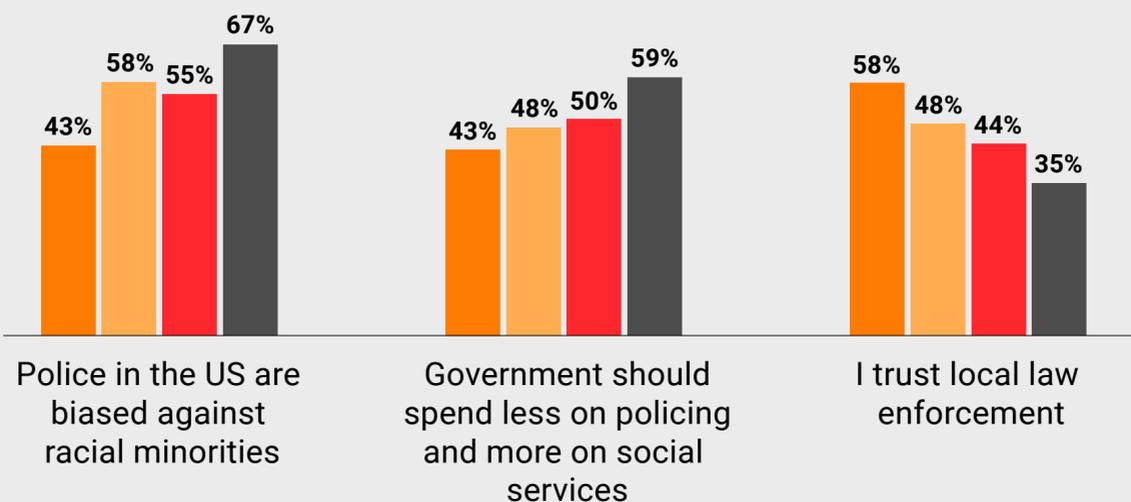
On policing issues, white people diverge significantly from other groups. A majority of white people believe police are unbiased when it comes to race and have high levels of trust in law enforcement. For others, and especially among Black respondents, these results were reversed.

Differences on homelessness-specific policing issues were smaller, but still followed the same pattern, with Black respondents most skeptical that police interventions would produce positive outcomes for homeless people.



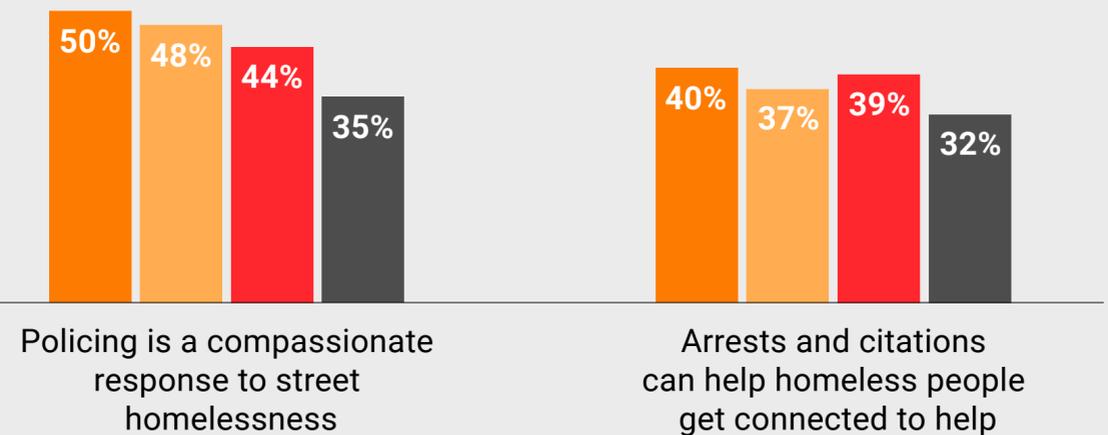
**Policing Attitudes**  
BY RACE/ETHNICITY

White Asian/Pacific Islander Hispanic/Latino Black



**Homelessness and Policing**  
BY RACE/ETHNICITY

White Asian/Pacific Islander Hispanic/Latino Black



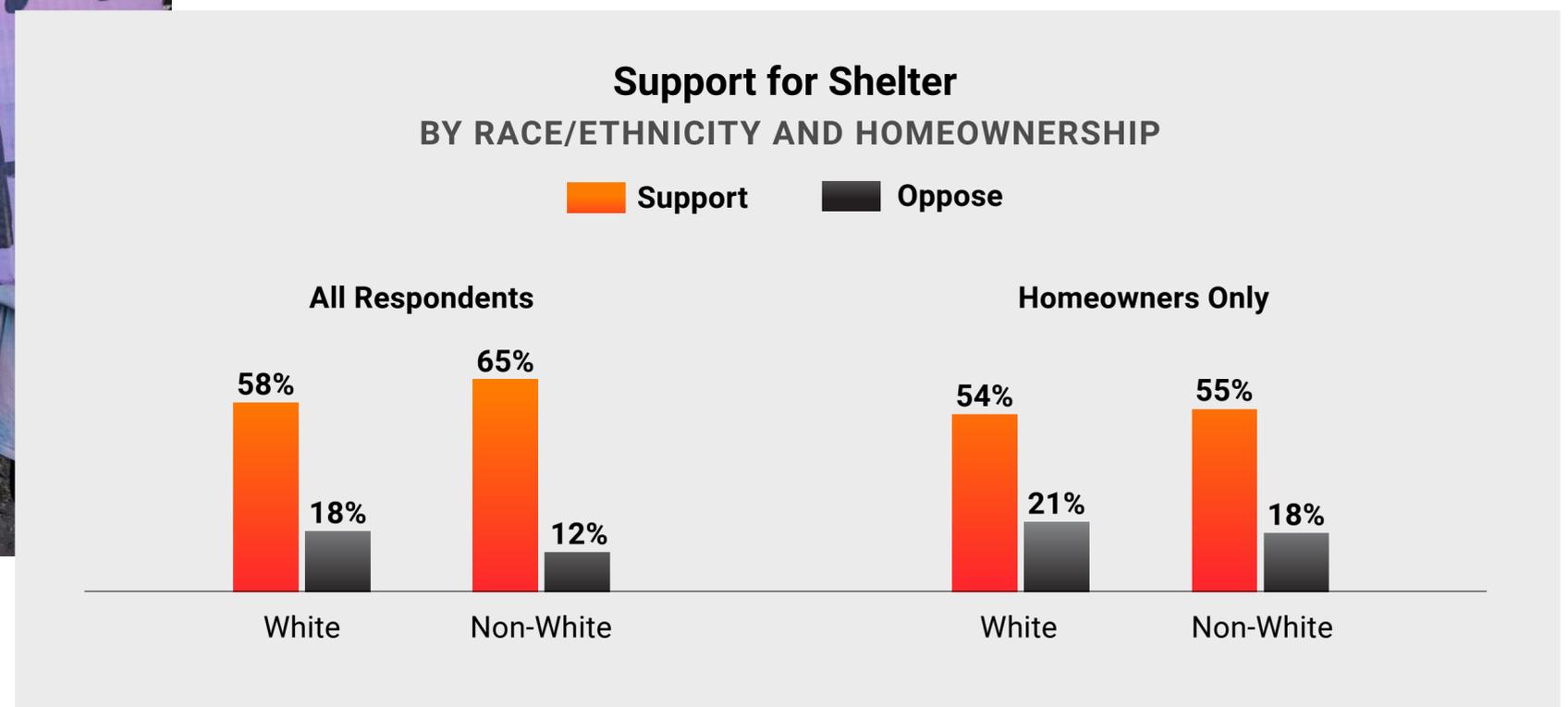
qC1: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements about policing?  
qC2: For each pair of statements below, please select which one better describes your attitudes toward policing.



# Homeownership Biases Cross Racial Lines

While there are significant differences between white and non-white people on homelessness in general, it seems that homeownership overwhelms some of these differences. Non-white respondents overall were more supportive of shelter, but when we look only at non-white homeowners, that difference largely disappears. While views still differ by ethnicity, especially around policing, homeownership can transcend those differences, for better or worse.

This emphasizes the importance of intersectionality, that people's experiences and views are the sum of many disparate aspects of their lives. More practically, advocates need to take a nuanced approach to understanding their audiences, and to find messages that speak best to the values that people in those audiences share in common.

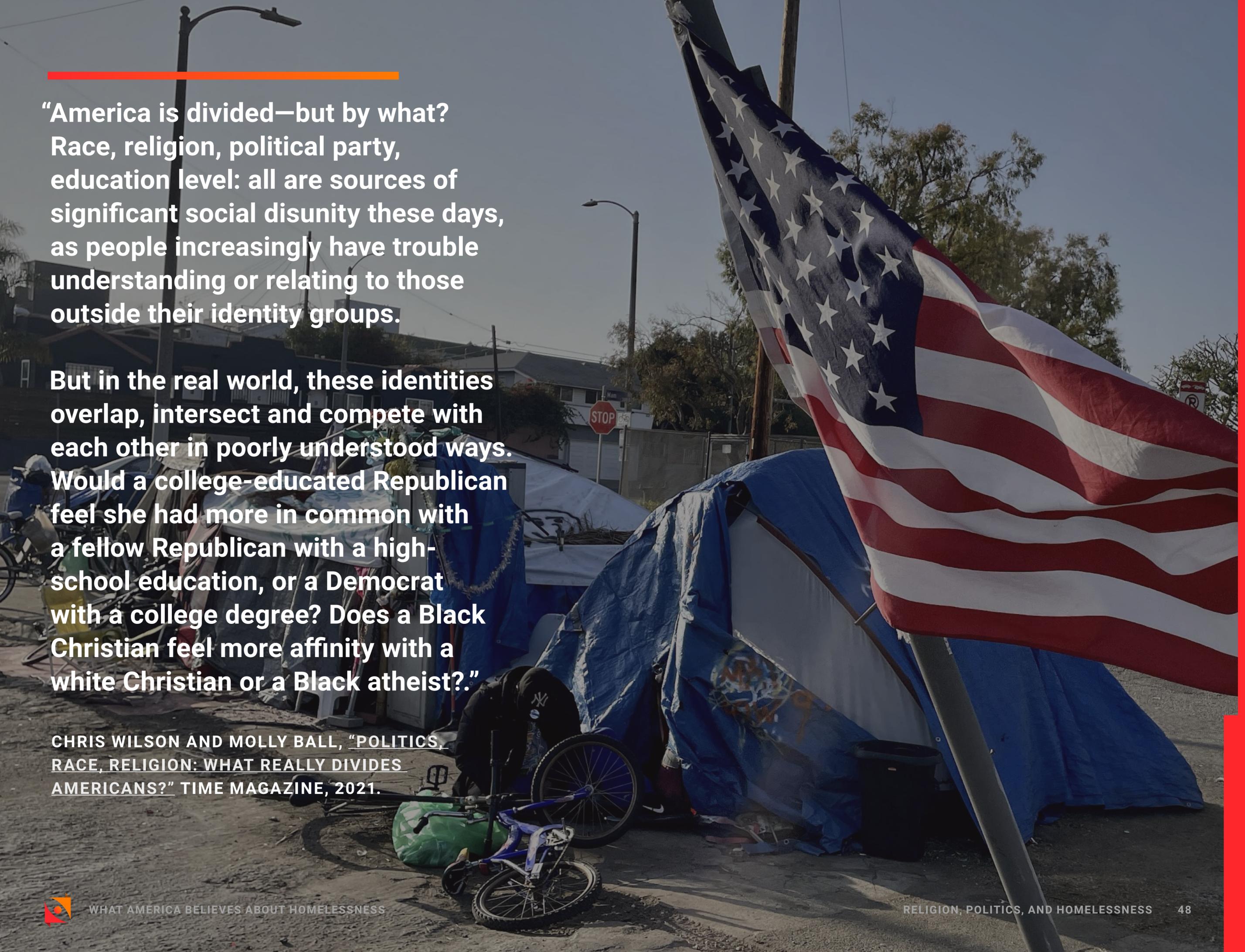


QA18: If there was a plan to build a homeless shelter in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?



# Religion, Politics, and Homelessness



A photograph of a homeless encampment. In the foreground, a large American flag is draped over a structure. Behind it, several makeshift tents made of blue and white tarps are visible. A person is crouching near a bicycle in the lower center. The background shows a street with a stop sign and utility poles under a clear sky.

**“America is divided—but by what? Race, religion, political party, education level: all are sources of significant social disunity these days, as people increasingly have trouble understanding or relating to those outside their identity groups.**

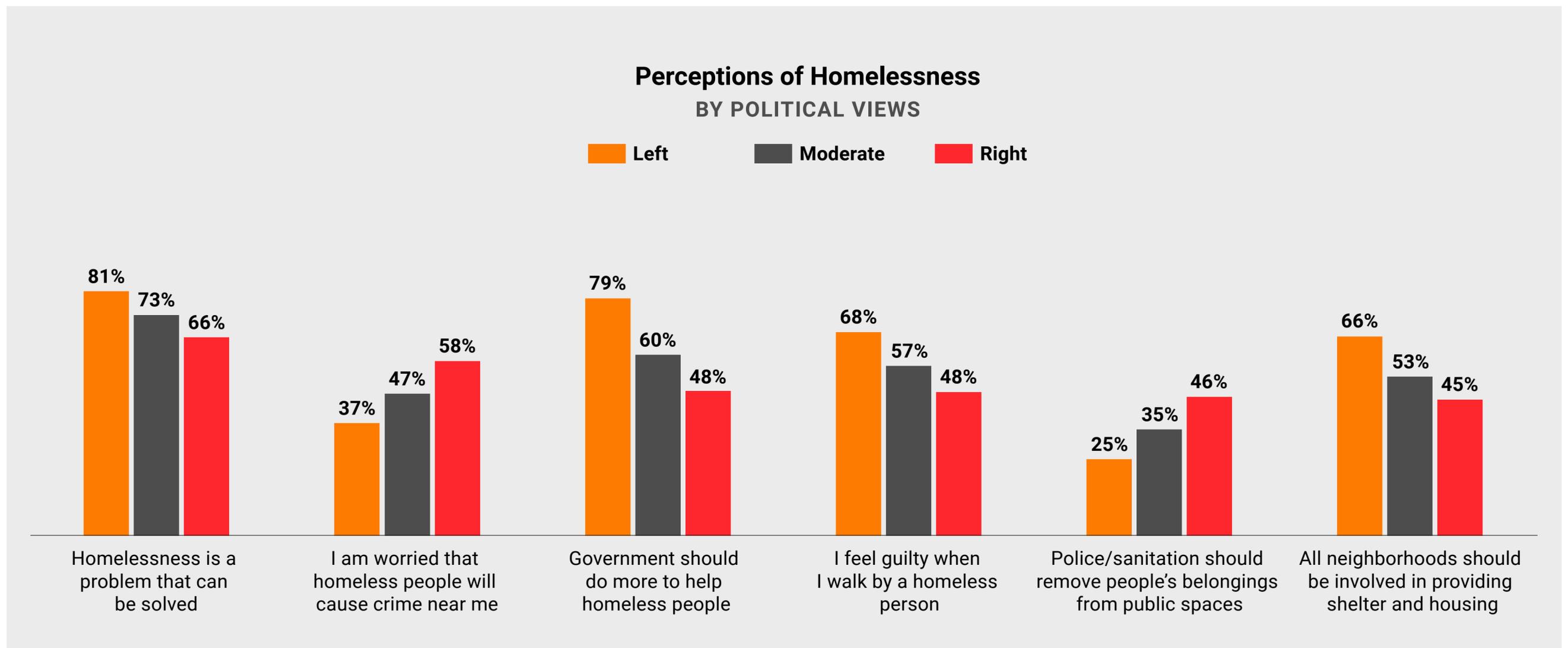
**But in the real world, these identities overlap, intersect and compete with each other in poorly understood ways. Would a college-educated Republican feel she had more in common with a fellow Republican with a high-school education, or a Democrat with a college degree? Does a Black Christian feel more affinity with a white Christian or a Black atheist?”**

**CHRIS WILSON AND MOLLY BALL, “POLITICS, RACE, RELIGION: WHAT REALLY DIVIDES AMERICANS?” TIME MAGAZINE, 2021.**



# Politics and the Homelessness Conversation

At a time when political polarization runs particularly hot, it's unsurprising that people's political views are a major determining factor in their opinions about homelessness. Left-leaning respondents are more confident that homelessness can be solved, more supportive of government interventions, and less concerned about homeless people committing crimes. Right-leaning respondents reported fewer feelings of guilt and more desire to see homeless people's possessions removed from the street. They were also less likely to believe that all neighborhoods should be involved in providing solutions to homelessness.

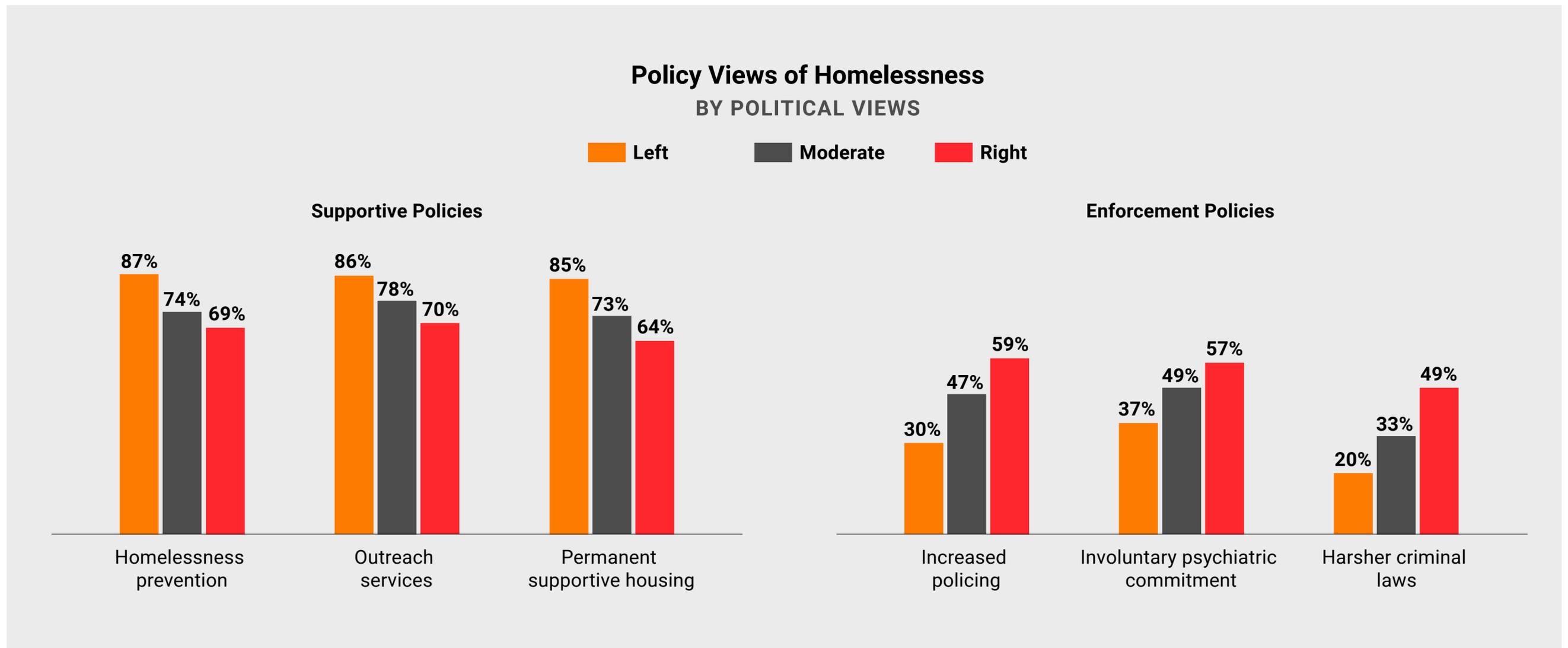


QA9A: For each pair of statements below, please select which one better describes your feelings about homelessness.



# Policy Is Rooted in Politics

Differences in political worldview and opinion can also be seen in people's policy preferences. Right-leaning respondents still see value in supportive policies, but were much less enthusiastic than left-leaning people. On the other hand, a majority or near-majority of right-leaning respondents support enforcement-driven policies, while the left side tends to oppose these. Strikingly, right-leaning people are more than twice as likely as left-leaners to support harsher criminal laws aimed at homeless people.



qA15: Below are a few policies that local governments might implement to address homelessness. For each policy below, please indicate how much you support that policy.

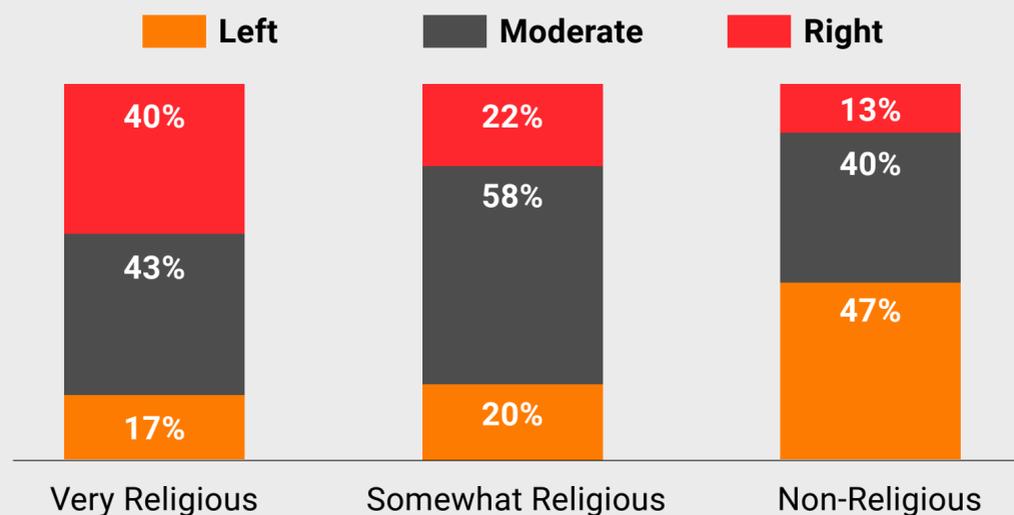


# Religion, Policing, and Housing/Shelter

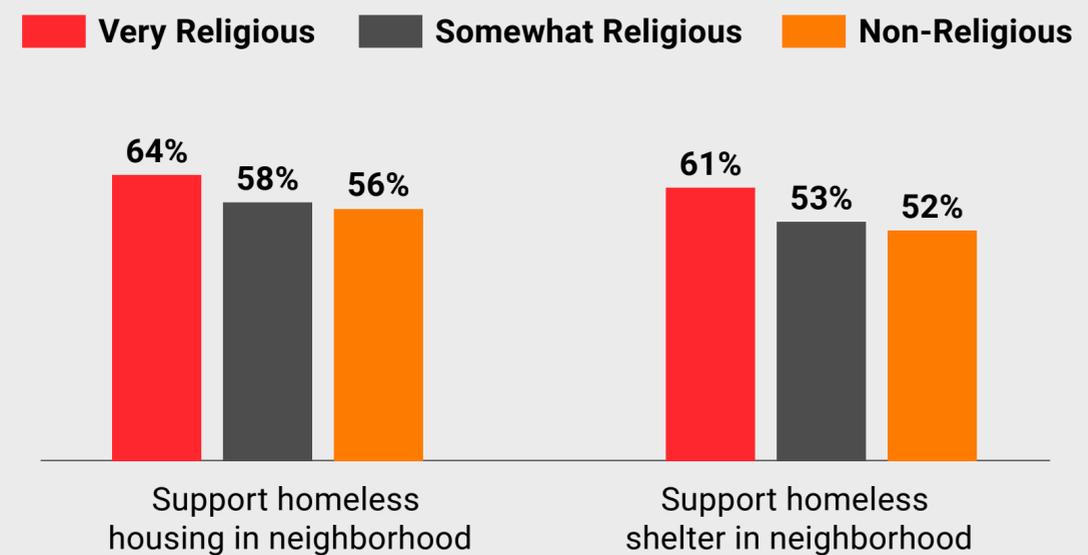
Religious groups, from missions to soup kitchens to faith-based social service providers, are an important part of our current homeless services system. Because so many religious organizations provide needed services, religious people in general are seen as natural allies in fighting homelessness. To some extent, this is true – people who identified as very religious were more likely than others to support shelter and homeless housing in their neighborhoods. However, religious people are also more conservative in general.



**Political Views  
BY RELIGIOUSNESS**



**Housing/Shelter Support  
BY RELIGIOUSNESS**



qD7: How do you identify your political beliefs?

qA17: If there was a plan to build housing for homeless people with on-site services in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?

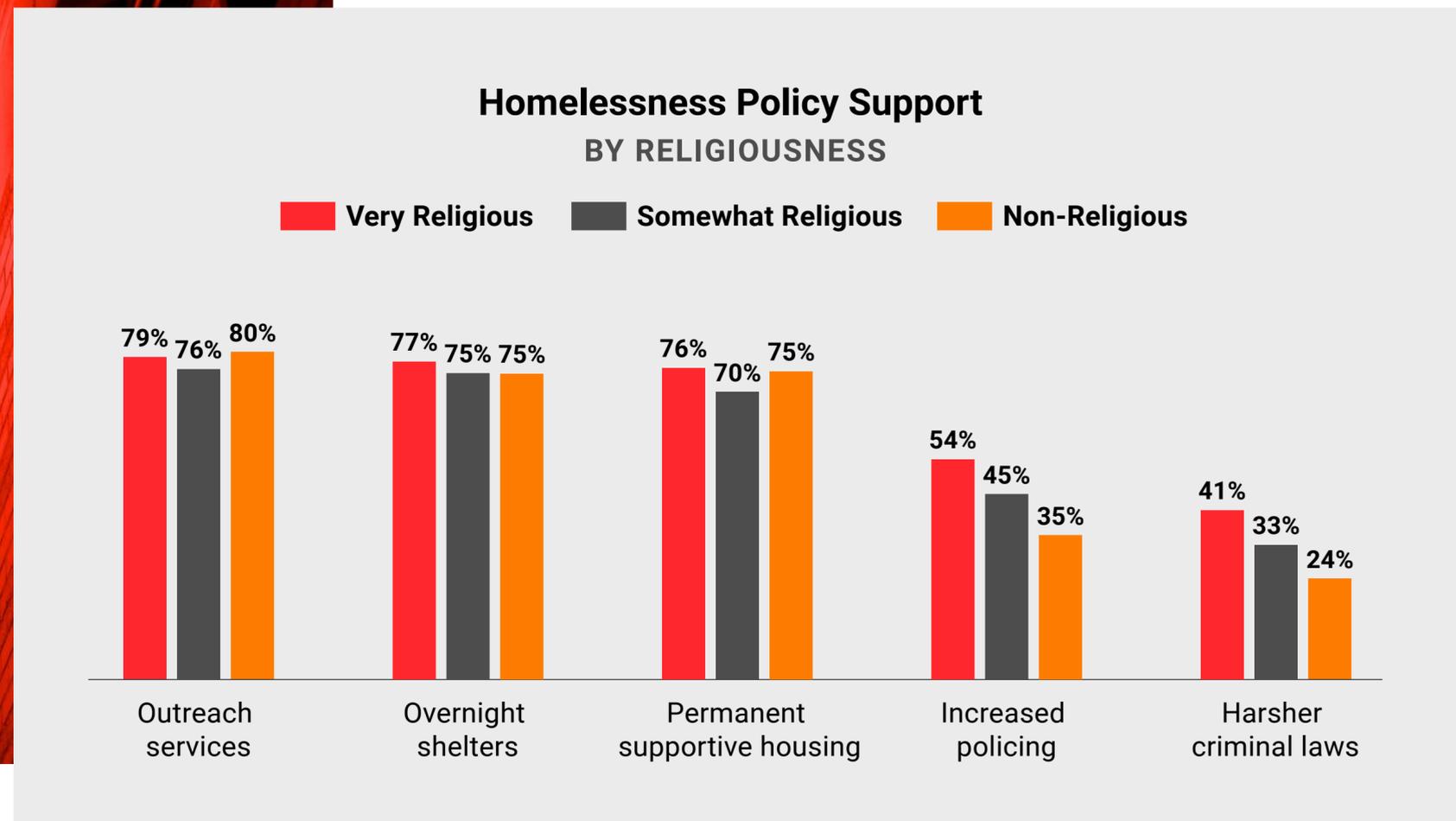
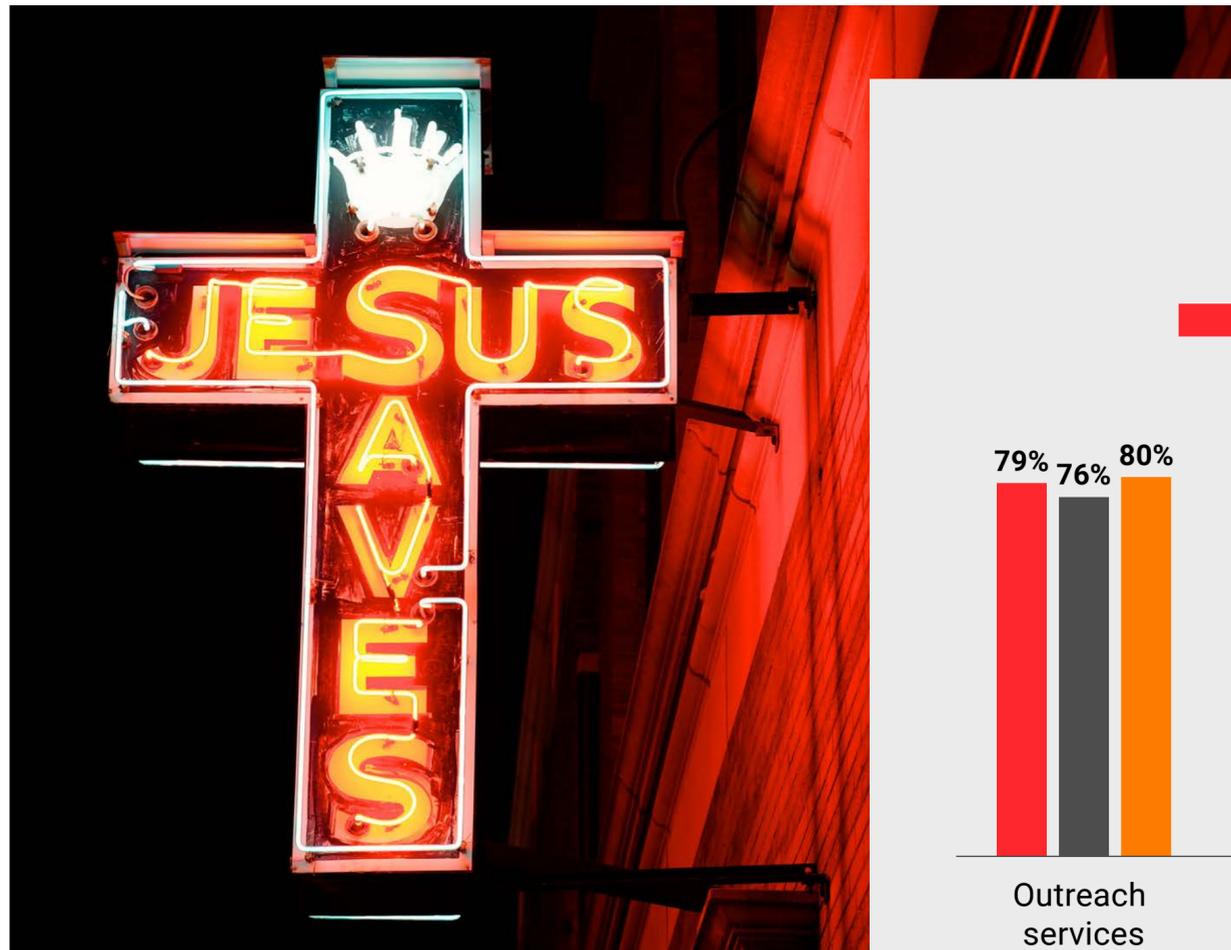
qA18: If there was a plan to build a homeless shelter in your neighborhood, would you support or oppose that plan?



# Religion: A Moralistic Worldview

In most of the data, we've seen that support for housing and shelter tends to correlate with opposition to policing and criminalization. But very religious people buck that trend, supporting both housing-oriented and police-led responses to homelessness.

In contrast to the more ideologically aligned views of others, very religious Americans hold a more moralistic worldview that tries to hold both government and homeless people to a moral standard, and judging them when they fail. This explains how so many religious respondents end up supporting efforts to help their community's poorest members while also supporting enforcement efforts that are punitive toward homeless people whose behaviors are viewed as immoral.

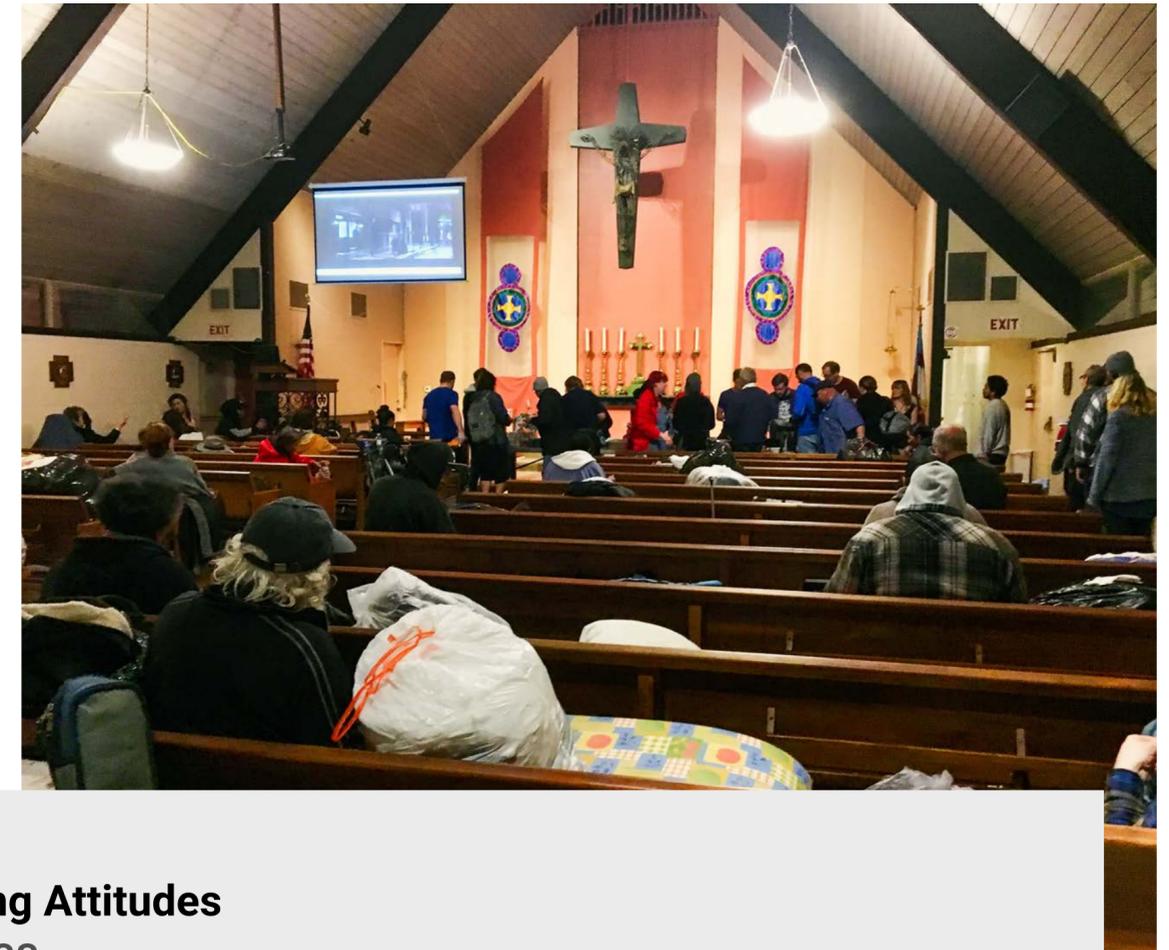


qA15: Below are a few policies that local governments might implement to address homelessness. For each policy below, please indicate how much you support that policy.

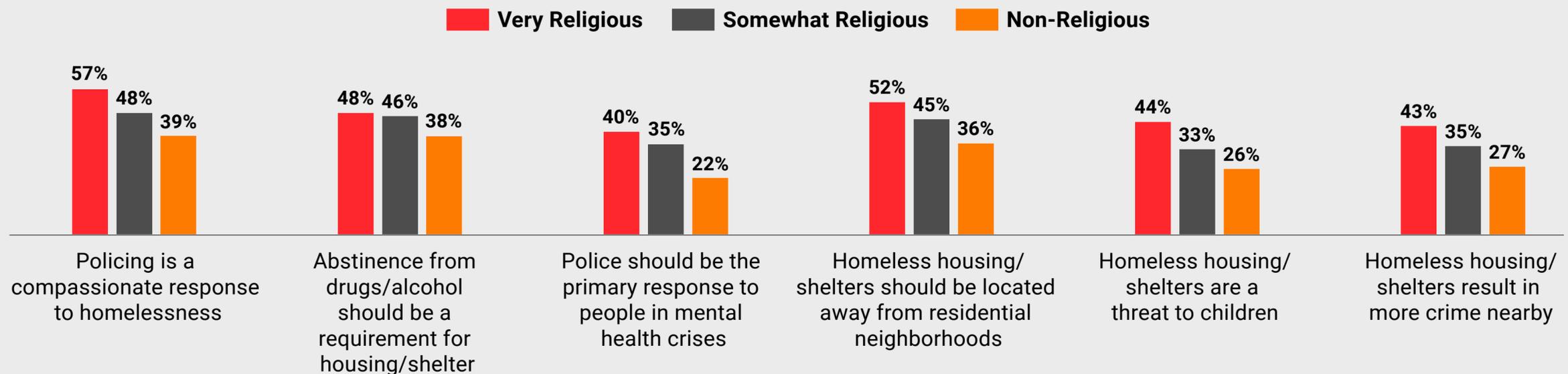


# Religiousness and Judgment

While highly religious people support more compassionate solutions, they also hold much more positive views of police, and more judgmental views toward homeless people. They are more likely to view the presence of homeless people or homelessness projects as a threat to children and community safety, and more likely to believe abstinence from substances should be a requirement for assistance. In contrast to more ideologically consistent positions, religious people's conservatism is complicated by their more moralistic worldview.



## Homelessness and Policing Attitudes BY RELIGIOUSNESS



qC2: For each pair of statements below, please select which one better describes your attitudes toward policing.

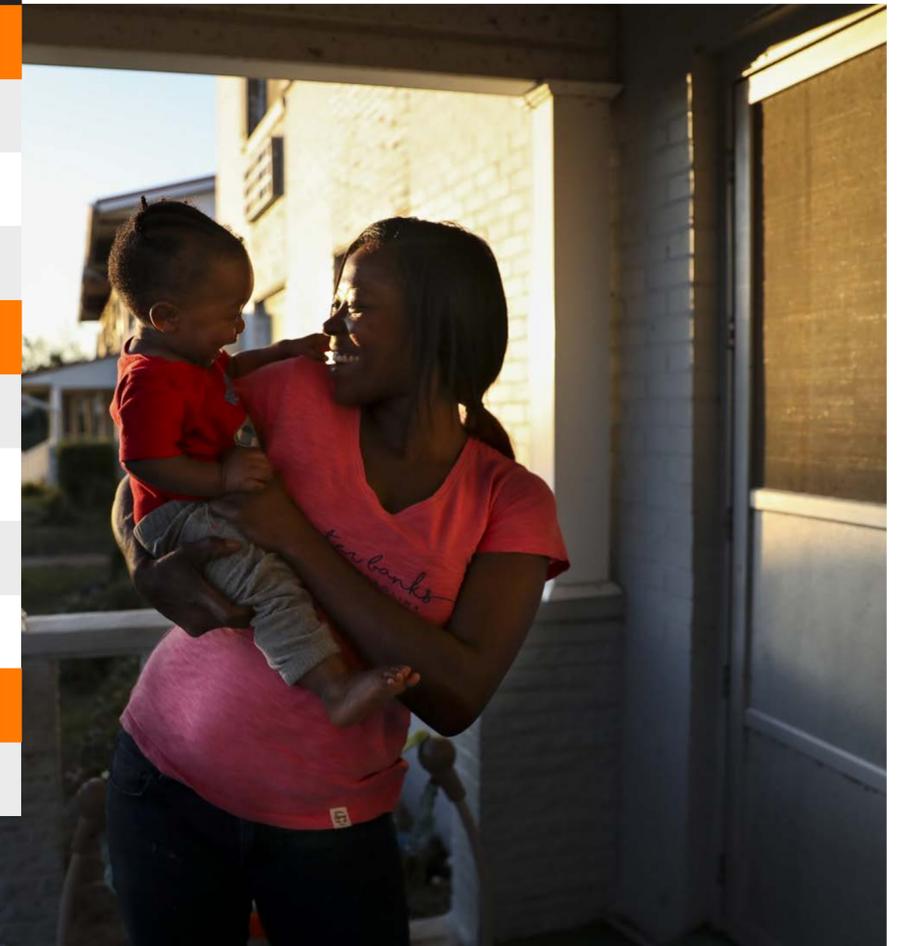
qC4: How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



# Religious Views by Ethnicity

Among those who are very religious, there are significant differences by ethnicity. People who are very religious and non-white expressed more permissive views about street homelessness, more support for government intervention, and were more likely to cite economic causes like evictions and low wages as important causes of homelessness. Notably, people who were very religious and non-white were twice as likely to report having been homeless in their lifetime than very religious white people – again pointing to the importance of lived experiences in shaping views.

	Very Religious + White	Very Religious + Non-White
<b>Homelessness Attitudes</b>		
Policing is a compassionate response to street homelessness	62%	48%
Government should do more to help homeless people	55%	65%
Homeless people should be allowed to sleep on sidewalks	35%	43%
<b>Causes of Homelessness</b>		
COVID-19 pandemic/economic crisis	49%	59%
Eviction/foreclosure	45%	58%
Low wages	38%	45%
Racism/housing discrimination	23%	30%
<b>Personal Experience</b>		
I have been homeless	11%	20%



QA9: For each pair of statements below, please select which one better describes your feelings about homelessness.

qA7: Below are a few issues that may cause people to become homeless. Which of the following do you believe are causes of homelessness in your community?

qA5: People have a number of different experiences related to homelessness. Which of the following statements describe your personal experience with homelessness?



## Case Study: When a Church Opposes a Project

In 2020, two Los Angeles service providers, Venice Community Housing and Safe Place for Youth (SPY), partnered to build a 40-unit permanent supportive housing complex in the Venice neighborhood. SPY already operated a drop-in center on the site, and the plan was to construct new housing on top of the existing center, with about half of the units reserved for 18- to 24-year-olds experiencing homelessness.

Near the site was a Catholic Church and school, St. Marks, which led the Archdiocese in Los Angeles to come out in opposition to the project, [stating in a letter](#) that:

***“The...supportive housing project presents very real dangers to our Catholic school and church community, in particular to our elementary school children and young parishioners.”***

The church and parents from the school fought to keep the local planning board from approving the project, which [one local media outlet](#) described as a “David and Goliath situation” pitting regular parents against the power of the city. Ironically, while opponents described the project as a threat to local children, the project was intended to help youth experiencing homelessness.

The Archdiocese’s opposition was strongly condemned in an [LA Times editorial](#):

***“It’s always infuriating to see community groups fighting housing for homeless people. But with homelessness in Los Angeles increasing by double-digit percentages and housing in desperately short supply, it is incomprehensible and disgraceful to see a church and the Archdiocese of Los Angeles fighting even a modest effort to get people permanently housed.”***

Venice Community Housing and Safe Place for Youth were [able to leverage](#) more supportive community members, as well as strong support from city officials, to overcome this opposition. The planning commission [approved the project](#) and it is [now under construction](#).

While churches are often the backbone of local homeless services, support from faith groups cannot be taken for granted. The same dynamics that drive neighborhood opposition also influence local organizations of all kinds, leading even those that are providing some services to oppose the location of other services in their neighborhoods. For advocates, engaging with these groups early and often is crucial to winning support, and ensuring that the only voices leaders hear are not those loudly opposed to progress.



# Conclusion and Recommendations



## Conclusion: Overcoming Barriers to Progress

The public broadly agrees that homelessness is a major problem, and that we need to address this problem through more affordable housing, especially for people with extremely low incomes. Despite this seeming consensus among the majority, communities across the country continue to see positive projects stall in the face of opposition, even as homelessness grows.

Whether it's local police, homeowners' associations, or faith groups, the people who are constant presences in their communities are often the most important drivers of community opinion. When leaders and advocates fail to authentically engage with local communities about both the need for and benefits of their proposed solutions, they are at a massive disadvantage. Compared to outsider professionals, groups and individuals embedded within the community are the voices their neighbors know and trust, having already earned credibility through regular local involvement.

People generally like their neighborhoods and their neighbors. When advocates enter a community speaking as experts or professionals, they are approaching community conversations as outsiders, not as neighbors.

**How can we better speak to communities and their concerns on that more personal level?**

**“It was a story about a successful young woman’s decline. It made it clear to me that any person is only a few circumstances from homelessness, and those circumstances are more likely to be completely out of our control than within.”**

**22 YEAR-OLD, PORTLAND, OR**



## Recommendations

### MESSAGE RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Go beyond “do more” messaging.

In [last year's report](#), we found that the most resonant messages on homelessness emphasize the things we have in common, and in particular that “homelessness can happen to anyone.” Don't tell stories about homelessness; tell stories about people - where they come from, what they struggle with, and what they need to help them get housed.

#### Speak to concerns about children and families.

Advocates need to reframe conversations about children and homelessness. Emphasize homelessness among youth and families to help build connections, find ways to connect directly with schools and other programs aimed at youth, and speak to how homelessness projects can help address the concerns of parents in a community.

#### Push back on NIMBY sentiment.

The hypocrisy of people who are supportive in general while opposed to projects near themselves remains a significant barrier to solving homelessness. Listening empathetically is important, but as messengers we also need to challenge NIMBY thinking. Ask questions that push people to recognize the contradiction in this position. For more on countering false or negative narratives about homelessness, this [piece by Victoria Vantol](#) provides useful tips on addressing stereotypes and fears around homelessness.

### MESSAGING STRATEGY RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Use visuals and stories to create implicit messages.

While there is a place for data, facts, and expertise, stories that show a more emotional, human element can help deliver information better than charts or graphs. Using images or videos creates opportunities to show instead of tell, leaving audiences with specific stories and memories that can help inform their views.

#### Repetition legitimizes. Repetition legitimizes.

Messages need to be reported in order to be heard. Try to approach messaging through a holistic lens, examining how different content (e.g. video, social media, newsletters, images, etc.) can help reinforce the same key messages over time.

#### Ground messaging in common values.

Views on homelessness are about more than just homelessness. Starting from a discussion of shared values (e.g. “everyone deserves a safe place to live”) can help start conversations out on the right footing.



## AUDIENCE RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Find the right messenger.**

The ideal messenger is one that their audience can identify with. If you're addressing parents concerned about a shelter or housing project in their area, find supportive parents who can help reframe projects as community assets instead of threats. The right messenger can address issues while relating to the audience's lives and concerns.

### **Build empathy.**

Just as empathy is necessary to connect housed people to the struggles of homeless people, empathy is also needed in speaking to concerned communities. People with concerns or reservations are often coming from a place of sympathy and uncertainty. Advocates need to acknowledge the validity of those concerns while pushing to dispel harmful stereotypes. Don't condescend or talk over these concerns, whether or not they're based on legitimate issues. Engage issues like crime, drugs, and garbage head on, and provide a more empathetic approach that addresses people's concerns.

### **Make a personal connection with the audience.**

When talking to people about homelessness, ask them questions about their experiences, and those of people that they know. If someone has a friend, relative, coworker, or even a distant acquaintance who has faced homelessness, this can help make people more open to the perspective of advocates.

## ORGANIZING AND ADVOCACY RECOMMENDATIONS

### **Coordinate and collaborate.**

Countless organizations all over the world are doing work on homelessness and housing insecurity. Reach out to people and organizations that share your interests, even if the meeting is only virtual. Share materials and resources whenever possible. Talk to others who are doing similar work to identify the barriers you both face, and to find strategies and tactics to overcome them.

### **Identify advocates within existing community organizations.**

Homelessness is an issue that intersects with countless other struggles. People interested in issues of racial justice, criminal justice, housing, tenants' rights, LGBTQ issues, and other causes share many of the same values as housing advocates and service providers. Finding groups doing this work in a community can help unlock the organic, neighbor-to-neighbor advocacy that's needed.

### **Work in coalition with advocates for tenants' rights, mental health issues, and racial justice.**

All three of these topics are intimately connected with homelessness, and finding ways to collaborate with organizations and organizers in these spaces can help expand the movement for housing justice.

### **Provide useful resources to organic advocates in the community.**

The most valuable allies in the fight against neighborhood-level opposition to homelessness projects are supportive neighbors. They are the most effective advocates because they are situated in the community and can speak to people's fears and concerns from an authentic position.



# Methodology and Acknowledgments



# Methodology

## Sampling Period

SEPTEMBER 27 - OCTOBER 8, 2021



### Audience

- n = 2,515 adults
- Age 18-70
- Registered Voters (proxy for civic engagement)
- Not employed in marketing or social services
- Balanced to census by age & gender

### Qualifying Area

#### HIGH UNSHELTERED COMMUNITIES

- Atlanta, GA
- Las Vegas, NV/Clark County
- Los Angeles County, CA
- Nashville/Davidson County
- Portland, OR/  
Multnomah County
- Sacramento County, CA
- Seattle, WA/King County
- Austin, TX/Travis County

#### LOW UNSHELTERED COMMUNITIES

- Boston, MA
- Chicago, IL
- Kansas City, MO & KS/Jackson & Wyandotte Counties
- Minneapolis/Hennepin County
- New York City, NY
- Omaha-Council Bluffs, NE
- Charlotte, NC/  
Mecklenburg County
- Miami-Dade County, FL



# Notes and Acknowledgments

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## About Invisible People

We imagine a world where everyone has a place to call home. Each day, we work to fight homelessness by giving it a face while educating individuals about the systemic issues that contribute to its existence. Through storytelling, education, news, and activism, we are changing the narrative on homelessness.

Invisible People is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit dedicated to educating the public about homelessness through innovative storytelling, news, and advocacy. Since our launch in 2008, Invisible People has become a pioneer and trusted resource for inspiring action and raising awareness in support of advocacy, policy change and thoughtful dialogue around poverty in North America and the United Kingdom.

## About the Author

**Mike Dickerson** is a researcher, writer, and advocate focused on homelessness and local government. Mike is a co-founder and member of Ktown for All, an all-volunteer homelessness advocacy group in Los Angeles.

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## Partners

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Barbara Poppe and associates  
The collective for impact

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# invisible PEOPLE

SEE.  
LEARN.  
TAKE ACTION.