

Paradise for Tourists, a Struggle for Natives: Native Hawaiian Homelessness in the Hawaiian Islands

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Introduction

Every year, millions of visitors travel to the Hawaiian islands unaware of the impact their vacations have on local communities. Enclaves of homeless camps that dot various popular spots among the islands have become more and more common. The tourism industry, alongside a multitude of other institutions and social factors, contribute to the egregiously high level of homelessness in the island chain. Currently, Hawaii is ranked second highest in the nation for rates of homelessness per 10,000 people¹. Native Hawaiians, the indigenous residents of the islands, are overrepresented in the homeless population. Of the 4,448 people facing homelessness on the island of Oahu, 51% identified as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (NHPI) despite accounting for only 10% of the population^{2,3}.

Homelessness has proven to be a significant determinant of health. Homeless folks in general are at increased risk for contracting communicable disease, experiencing violence, malnutrition, and a range of behavioral and mental health issues including (but not limited to) depression, alcoholism, and other substance abuse disorders⁴. In fact, 24% of homeless on Oahu and 35% of neighbor island homeless were deemed chronically homeless (defined as experiencing homelessness for at least a year while simultaneously suffering from a disabling chronic mental or physical condition)².

Because of these adverse health outcomes, this brief will explore avenues to ameliorate Native Hawaiian homelessness. More specifically, this brief will describe how the colonization of Hawaii has contributed to homelessness of Native Hawaiians, and how tourism perpetuates patterns of indigenous homelessness within the

islands. The brief will then identify current initiatives that have been taken to tackle homelessness and the next steps to ensure housing for the indigenous community of the Hawaiian islands.

Background

Colonialism and Loss of Land

Hawaii's past of unwarranted Western contact and illegal annexation under U.S. imperialism has undeniably contributed to the current plight of homelessness. From the moment Captain James Cook stepped foot in the island nation, the Native Hawaiian people and culture were decimated. Infectious disease ravaged through Hawaii cutting the population by 90%⁵. This did not stop, as missionaries, U.S. businessmen, and more Western influences continued the practice of stripping Native Hawaiians of their land, culture, politics, and economy. In 1893, a U.S.-backed coup d'etat overthrew the Hawaiian monarchy, and the United States annexed Hawaii. After, foreign labor imports from China, Philippines, Japan, and Puerto Rico increased causing the continual decline and displacement of Native Hawaiians. In recognizing their wrongdoings, the U.S. instituted lackluster reparations through an apology resolution and the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act of 1921⁵. The Hawaiian Homes Commission Act was an attempt to provide affordable housing and some land after the violent displacement and removal of Native Hawaiians⁵.

Tourism on Housing Affordability

Though the events of colonialism occurred over a century ago, the long-term impacts are still seen. After annexation, Native Hawaiians lost autonomy over their land and their agricultural way of life. Not long after, the island chain

turned to a new economic industry: tourism. Neocolonialism under the pretense of tourism continues to assert itself as a dominating force in the Hawaiian economy.

While the coasts are saturated with hotels and resorts, a much more hidden aspect of tourism that greatly exacerbates the housing affordability crisis is the vacation rental unit (VRU) industry. VRUs are rental properties used for transient parties visiting for less than 30 days. The issue with VRUs is that many of these are owned by non resident buyers -- on Maui alone, 52% of homes are sold to nonresidents, and 60% of condos and apartments have gone to investors and second homeowners⁶. Foreign-owned VRUs pose two primary concerns. First, they limit the supply of available housing to locals and Native Hawaiians. Currently, 64,700-66,000 homes are needed at an affordable price to accommodate the growing demand for homes while many VRUs remain unoccupied for a majority of the year⁷. Secondly, cities like San Francisco who also struggle with VRU market issues have found that VRUs result in the withdrawal of housing from the residential market, resulting in higher housing costs⁸.

In fact, lack of affordable housing is one of the primary drivers for Native Hawaiian homelessness. Hawaii's Point in Time report surveyed those who were homeless and found that 17% were unable to pay rent, 15% lost their job, and 12% suffered from some form of money loss⁹. Fiscal losses are incredibly important in determining home affordability. Moreover, the cost of housing in Hawaii is at a whopping 149% above the national average, with a cost of living index that is 65.7% higher than the rest of the nation¹⁰. Studies have shown that an average of 40% of Native Hawaiian households are cost-burdened by housing prices, meaning that more than 30% of their income goes toward housing¹¹. Egregious housing prices coupled

with the fact that a higher proportion of Native Hawaiians are living at the poverty level compared to their white counterparts (15.4% vs 9.6%) makes it unsurprising that the once indigenous population of the Hawaiian archipelago are now outcasts in their own home¹².

Aside from the vicious housing market that results from foreign-owned VRUs, Hawaii's tourism industry has also led to the conception of many laws that criminalize homeless folks for occupying spaces that may deter visitors away. For instance, Ambrose, et. al, wrote that Honolulu city ranks 8th in the nation for its unfriendly homeless policies¹⁰. These policies include the removal from sidewalks, illegalization of sleeping at most parks and beaches, the retrofitting of bus stops, and "cleanups" that displace homeless folks to the outskirts of the city, away from high-density tourist areas^{10,11}. While the intention of this is to move homeless folks off the streets and into shelters, reports have shown that these cleanups do not increase homeless shelter occupancy¹³.

Homelessness Impacts

As mentioned, homelessness has shown to adversely impact one's health. In homeless Native Hawaiians specifically, they suffer rates of asthma and hypertension at 7.3% and 2.4% (respectively) higher than non-native homeless members¹⁰. More generally, homeless folks have a higher prevalence of infections, COPD, and mental health disorders¹⁴. Compounded by multiple risks and lack of access to care, homeless people also suffer from mortality rates 2-31 times higher than housed people¹⁴. These health impacts often lead to increased hospitalizations for preventable ailments. From 2013 to 2016, the Queens Hospital on the island of Oahu rose from 6,958 to 11,000¹³. Overall, the homelessness among Native Hawaiians is an unfortunate byproduct of Western colonialism

and the tourism industry and has life threatening health impacts.

Current Efforts

One of the largest (and only) efforts to address Native Hawaiian homelessness specifically is the Hawaiian Homes initiative. Initiated in 1921, the act set aside over 200,000 acres of land to build affordable houses at an annual rent of \$1¹⁵. However, this policy does come with limitations. To qualify, one must prove a blood quantum of 50% Native Hawaiian ancestry. Through the import of foreign labor and the dwindling of “pure” Native Hawaiians from colonial times, the number of mixed race Native Hawaiians have increased substantially. Currently, Mokuau et al, reported 70% of Native Hawaiians report being multiracial with one or more races⁵. As if the barrier to entry was not enough, the quality of these houses are typically sub par. Prior to 20 years ago, a permit was not required for construction. Many residents reported increased repair costs stemming from the lack of eaves on their homes (an issue that leads to rotting exteriors from rain and weather)¹⁵.

On the more community level, there are several organizations that work to reduce homelessness in the islands. The *Housing First* project works to find permanent housing for chronically homeless people and equips them with life-skills to ensure they stay housed¹³. Additionally, the *Hawaii Pathways Project (HPP)* used an evidence-based experimental strategy to help homeless people who specifically struggle with substance abuse. From their three-year pilot, HPP estimated that they’ve been able to assist clients in reducing health care costs by almost half and produce an average net savings of \$2,370 per month per client¹⁶. These grassroots organizations and evidence-based supports may be key in addressing chronic homelessness in Hawaii. However, their efforts must be met with

political and legislative support to ensure Native Hawaiians are housed.

Policy Recommendations

The first and perhaps most important policy recommendation would be to increase the supply of housing. Implementing stricter sanctions on VRU violations to decrease the number of illegally occupied VRUs may be one potential route. Throughout the state, many VRUs rent out whole homes illegally rather than the legal rent-a-room/rent-a-unit⁶. Cracking down on these either through fines or requiring more transparency of who owns these homes and who they are renting to may free up more homes within the real estate market⁶. As we’ve seen, housing affordability (and subsequently, housing availability) are directly impacted by the VRU and tourism industry.

Moreover, reforming the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act may prove effective in providing housing for Native Hawaiians specifically. For instance, reducing the blood quantum as the proportion of mixed-race Native Hawaiians grows is one avenue to lowering the barrier to entry for housing. Additionally, engaging and assisting pre-existing grassroots organizations that are hard at work to address homelessness in Hawaii may prove vital in housing Native Hawaiian communities as well. However, engaging directly with Native Hawaiian communities, acknowledging the historical trauma of colonization, and prioritizing their needs will be essential to mitigate homelessness in Hawaii.

Additional Resources

- Hawaiian Homes: Information, Application Requirements, and more: <http://dhhl.hawaii.gov/>
- Key legislation related to homelessness: <http://www.hawaiilodging.org/homelessness.html>

- The socio-cultural impact of tourism on local communities:
<https://files.hawaii.gov/dbedt/visitor/sustainable-tourism-project/drafts/General-Pop-Socio-Cultural-Report.pdf>
- Housing First Project information:
<https://homelessness.hawaii.gov/housing/>

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