KING'S WATER CENTRE

KING'S College LONDON

POLICY BRIEFS

Homelessness, Water Insecurity, and the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation

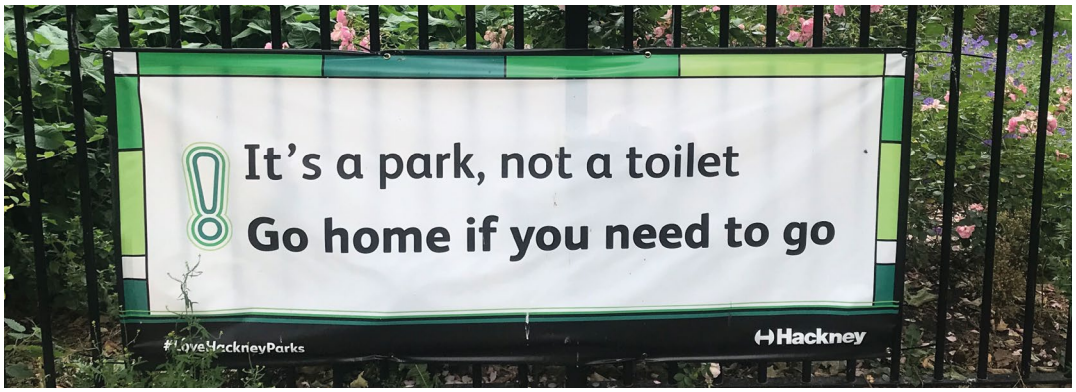
AUTHORS: **Katie Meehan**, King's Water Centre, King's College London
Marianne Odetola, Department of Geography, King's College London
Alison Griswold, Department of Geography, King's College London

A CRISIS OF PUBLIC WATER ACCESS

The Covid-19 pandemic upended public water and toilet access in many cities and revealed fundamental linkages between stable housing and water. In London, emergency policies during the spring 2020 lockdown led to the temporary closure of many public toilets and potable water sources, such as fountains and taps. By that summer, as weather improved but lockdown restrictions remained, city parks were filled with human excrement as Londoners gathering in outdoor green spaces resorted to using their surroundings as a toilet.[1]

In the London borough of Hackney, local officials issued so many fines to public urinators in a single May weekend that they reportedly ran out of paper to write citations.[2] Banners posted on park gates by Hackney Council declared: "It's a park, not a toilet. Go home if you need to go" (Figure 1). Crowd-sourced 'loo maps' sprung up online, inviting people to post the locations of toilets along with details like opening hours, cleanliness, and charges.[3]

This widespread closure of public toilets and water sources – during a global pandemic, no less, when the prevailing public health advice was to wash your hands well and often[4] – reveals the importance of water-related services as a public good. More nefariously, these emergency policies – including the use of shame and stigmatization (see Figure 1) directed at people who are unable to access a bathroom – turns a harsh spotlight on an entire population that routinely experiences water, toilet, and sanitation insecurity. While the Covid-19 closures were likely many Londoners' first encounter with insecure access to water and sanitation, such conditions are a daily reality for unhoused (homeless) people.[5] After all, when the institutional policy is "go home if you need to go," to quote Hackney Council, what happens if you do not have a 'home'?



Source: K. Meehan

***Figure 1:** "Go home if you need to go." What happens if you are unhoused and need water or sanitation access?*

THE DWELLING PARADOX

An estimated 163,100 households in London experienced homelessness in 2019, according to the UK-based charity Shelter.[6] In 2019, the number of unhoused people in the UK increased by 10% each quarter. Rising numbers of unhoused people is a global trend across industrialized countries. In the United States, for example, 580,466 people experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2020, an increase of 12,751 (2.2%) from 2019[7] – and, by extension, an increase in people without safe or regular access to water and sanitation.

Improving access to safe water and sanitation is a global development priority, enshrined in the UN Human Right to Water and UN Sustainable Development Goals.[8] Safe, reliable, affordable, and sufficient water is necessary for a thriving and healthy life.[9] And yet, to date, little attention has been paid to securing the rights to water and sanitation for unhoused people, despite their growing numbers in industrialized countries and their broad exposure to water-related hazards and insecurities.[10]

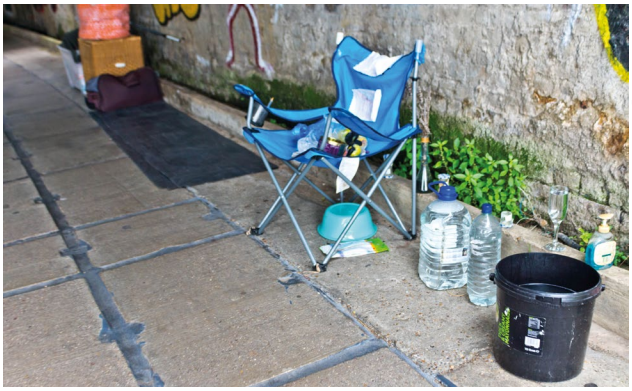
The human right to water and sanitation is often realized in terms of a private home: for instance, whether someone has regular access to piped (and running) hot and cold water, a toilet, and a bath or shower in their apartment or house. This framework does an obvious disservice to unhoused populations, for whom no fixed or stable 'home' means no piped water. We call this the 'dwelling paradox' of the human right to water and sanitation. Importantly, we argue this paradox is actively produced by a legacy of modernist water governance and institutional gaps between the housing sector and water policy (or, the housing-water nexus).[11] Unhoused people are caught between paradigms in water policy and urban development that realize a right to water primarily through private, individualized infrastructural connections in the home.[12] Furthermore, current policy norms also insist on criminalizing unhoused people in public spaces, further imperiling their ability to access safe water and sanitation.

While homelessness is most often regarded as a problem of public health or urban planning, this policy brief argues that homelessness is also a problem of water policy. By understanding the human right to water through the narrow lens of piped water at home, the water policy community at large – managers, practitioners, decision-makers, and scholars – carries some blame for how unhoused people fall through the cracks in equitable water provision and become trapped in the dwelling paradox. Addressing this problem will require going beyond a technical and sectoral approach, toward the more challenging task of tackling the complex factors that create and sustain the vulnerability and marginality of unhoused people in urban spaces.

WHAT WE KNOW

Homelessness is defined as the lack of regular and adequate housing. Unhoused people (including 'rough sleepers' in the UK) may have places they call home, but for a variety of reasons they lack regular or stable housing.[13] Reasons may include eviction, natural disasters, job loss, mental or physical illness, drug addiction, divorce, domestic violence, dowry-related and land conflicts, a lack of affordable housing, or abuse by political and family power structures.[14]

Housing is not the same as shelter. Unhoused people may obtain shelter with varying levels of comfort, from space under a bridge to a bed in a single room occupancy (SRO) organization.[15] By definition, shelter offers protection from the elements and is temporary. Housing tends to be stable and formalized through rental agreements, home ownership, or kin arrangements. In contrast to shelter, housing in most societies offers increased security, permanence, and the ability to connect to vital public utilities like water and sewerage.



Source: istockphoto.com

***Image:** A unhoused person's overnight accommodation under a bridge on the banks of the Regent's canal in London. In the absence of secure water supply, unhoused people often rely on bottled water for drinking, cooking, and hygiene.*

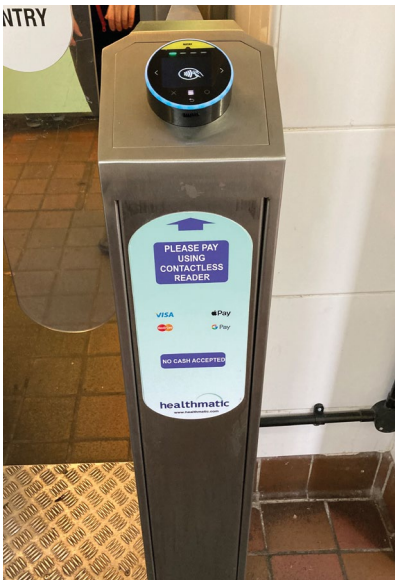
The scholarship on homelessness and water-related issues yields several key insights. First, unhoused populations are especially vulnerable to conditions of domestic water insecurity.[16] Without a stable home, unhoused people must rely on social infrastructures (e.g., shelters and charities) and interpersonal relations (e.g., friends and family) to gain access to water, sanitation, and hygiene

facilities.[17] Such infrastructures and relations can be precarious, context-specific, and therefore a 'patchwork' solution at best to fulfilling a human right to water.

Second, access takes significant effort and time. Unhoused people must travel to sites like churches, shelters, and SROs on the specific days they are open – a tacit knowledge, often gained through trial and error – just to fill a water bottle, use the toilet, take a shower, or clean a wound. To access these places, people spend extra time and money, and are reliant on public transit schedules. Previous research shows that when households lack convenient water supply, the burden of procuring, transporting, and managing water falls disproportionately on women and children.[18] The same is true for unhoused people.

Third, shelter does not guarantee access to water and sanitation. A perceived barrier to the creation of more transitional housing options – for instance, motorway rest stops, designated car camping sites, and brick-and-mortar SROs that offer services – is community concern about cleanliness and sanitation.[19]

Fourth and finally, unhoused people are disproportionately exposed to environmental hazards, such as toxic chemicals, waterborne diseases, pollution, unsafe water sources, and unclean sanitation facilities.[20] People living in exposed environments like parks, riverbanks, and rail tracks face an especially hazardous experience. A lack of water can also compound other environmental risks frequently experienced by unhoused people, like heat/sun exposure and inability to find cool locations.[21]



Source: K. Meehan

***Figure 2:** Barriers to entry. Since 2015, Royal Parks charges people to use the toilet in Greenwich Park.*

SHAME AND CRIMINALIZATION IS NOT THE ANSWER

Alongside a tacit expectation that water and sanitation needs should be met in a private home, public access to water and sanitation is increasingly restricted or even criminalized. Before Covid-19 shut down public restrooms, many public toilets and drinking water sources (like water fountains) in industrialized countries have already been closed, fallen into disrepair, or been functionally replaced with 'pay-to-use' services, such as bathrooms in commercial establishments like Starbucks.[22] A trip to the toilet in London's Greenwich Park, for example, requires a bank card and costs 20p (Figure 2)—a potential barrier to an unhoused person, who may not have a permanent address and bank account.

Normal human functions are increasingly criminalized in public space. For example, the Los Angeles Police Department issued parking citations to LAVAMAE, an organization that provides mobile showers and restrooms to houseless communities in Skid Row, a 50-block neighborhood in downtown LA.[23] So-called 'move along' orders allow houseless Angelenos to stay in place for a maximum of nine hours (between 9pm and 6am) before they can be evicted and told to 'move on' by law enforcement. "The lack of availability of water in Skid Row is not the result of an infrastructure failure," argues the Los Angeles Community Action Network in a 2017 report, "rather, it is the result of deliberate indifference to a crisis on City Hall's doorstep impacting the health of thousands of people living on the streets of Skid Row."

In fact, cities in the United States have long defined acceptable behavior in public spaces in a way that targets the homeless.[24] Laws making it illegal to sleep, loiter, urinate, and defecate in public were common in cities from New York to Atlanta to San Francisco; rather than offer infrastructure to accommodate these basic human needs, "survival itself is criminalized."[25] As Dr. Jessie Speer observes, homeless populations are depicted as dirty and dangerous in public policy and their removal is often described in the language of "cleaning up" public space.[26] Rather than provide sanitary interventions like running water and toilets to homeless encampments, Speer argues, public officials used health and sanitation concerns to justify bulldozing encampments and issuing evictions.[27]

Research shows that stigmatization and shame is a highly ineffective way to induce behavior change.[28] This is as true for the Londoners who used public parks as toilets during the first Covid-19 lockdown as it is for unhoused populations forced to make difficult choices around water

and sanitation every day. Current policy paradigms do nothing to improve the situation; they may actively harm unhoused people. Future policies, both in regular times and in emergency public health scenarios, ought to start from the understanding that clean water and sanitation are vital to a thriving human life – and that public access should be expanded, not curtailed or shut down.

Policy solutions to the homelessness 'crisis' must address the factors that produce institutional fragmentation between the housing sector and public water policy.

Unhoused people are caught in the dwelling paradox – a space of institutional entrapment between a property-rights paradigm in water policy and urban planning approaches that realize a right to water through private infrastructural connections, such as a house piped into a water network. This paradox is produced through an institutional matrix of state power, authority, and jurisdiction, and is amplified by anti-homeless legislation. Such spaces of entrapment make it extremely difficult for unhoused people to achieve a safe, healthy, and thriving life – the basis of the human right to water and sanitation.

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CONTACT

Lead researcher: Dr. Katie Meehan (katie.meehan@kcl.ac.uk), King's College London

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Production of this report was supported by a grant from the Faculty of Social Sciences & Public Policy, King's College London.

HOW TO CITE THIS WORK

Meehan, K., Odetola, M., and Griswold, A. (2022) *Homelessness, Water Insecurity, and the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation.* London: King's College London. https://doi.org/10.18742/pub01-085