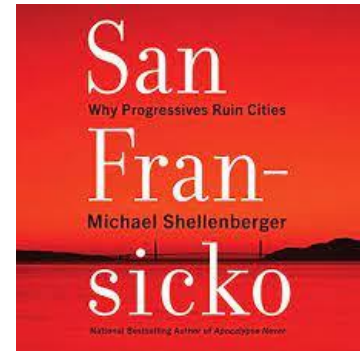


# **A Trenchant Critique of Ideologies of Homelessness**

a review from Dick Burkhardt of

## **San Fran-sicko: Why Progressives Ruin Cities** By Michael Shellenberger (2021)



Shellenberger presents a well-researched and cogent critique of progressive West Coast cities which have gone overboard on dubious ideologies of homelessness, drugs, and crime. He calls for a new pragmatism that looks at what actually works. Basically this comes down to “tough love” practices versus victimhood culture. A 30 year resident of the Bay Area, he finally started asking “Why does it keep getting worse?” – despite all the altruistic motives, loads of money, and grandiose promises.

His biggest target is the “open-air drug market” in these big cities – giving addicts easy access to all the drugs they want, even if this means more people ending up dead or dysfunctional and uglified and dangerous communities. He wants a new state authority to take over housing and homelessness in California – to make the governor accountable for results = but operating mostly on demonstration projects and incentives, based on what works nationally, even globally.

Shellenberger sees a lot of waste in the current system, coming from a plethora of poorly coordinated non-profits, without a clear and effective overall plan. But, showing his politically conservative side, he downplays the fundamental role of escalating inequality over the last 40 years and how neoliberal financial capitalism continues to drive up housing costs at a far higher rate than wages.

Another peculiarity of Shellenberger, shared by other conservatives like Christopher Rufo, is that he wants the word “homeless” to refer to only

the hard core – those with major mental or drug / alcohol problems. As a consequence, he never even refers to successful practices, such as tiny house villages, for the many normal people who have just run out of options.

That is, modest income or job loss or injury often combines with the high cost of housing and not enough opportunities for renting a room or couch surfing. Often such people end up living out of their cars or RVs or in tents or temporarily on the street. Without tiny house villages and the like, such people may, over time, become the hard core themselves. So shutting down the pipeline to hard core homelessness must be a key objective. National policies to drastically reduce speculation in the FIRE sector (Finance, Insurance, Real Estate), and to tax excess welfare to finance more European-style “social housing” would make a huge difference.

As to specific policies, Shellenberger supports vastly more shelters instead of high cost apartments. He says, “The problem with Housing First is that it doesn’t require that people address their mental illness and substance abuse, which are often the underlying causes of homelessness” (p 35). However neither do shelters.

It would seem that the key issue is how to get people into effective treatment programs and also back into the community leading stable and productive lives. I know that tiny house villages have case workers that help with the latter, in addition to others in the village, while Shellenberger advocates tough love tactics for the former, combined with a revival of mandatory institutional care for the worst cases.

Shellenberger provides useful statistics to put the problem in perspective. “The number of injection drug users in San Francisco is 50% larger than the number of high school students. San Francisco gives away more needles to drug users, 6 million per year, than New York City, despite having 1/10 the population.” (p 43). “About 2/3 of the time

of hospital emergency room departments in San Francisco is spent serving the homeless” (p 44).

He also notes that “Decriminalization doesn’t end drug violence...Even in Portugal drug overdose deaths and overall drug use rose after decriminalization”. This, like open-air drug markets, end up “lowering production and distribution costs, thus increasing use” (p 49). Drug addiction in the US rose 3 fold during the last 2 decades, now similar to the market for alcohol.

Drug overdoses are now about 30% of all deaths under 65 in San Francisco (p 53). As to the opioid epidemic, “overprescription of opioids was equally due to naïve or unskeptical compassion on the part of doctors and the wider society”, not just the greed of pharmaceutical companies (p. 57). “Harm reduction” isn’t working in practice. “Research finds that many addicts need mandatory treatment, and that it works nearly as well as voluntary treatment” (p 68) and that drug courts are very effective.

Mental illness has also increased dramatically. Generally, “the mentally ill are 10 times more likely to be incarcerated than hospitalized” with one doctor comparing parts of San Francisco to an “open-air insane asylum” (p 90). One study estimates that around ¼ of people killed by police in the US have an untreated severe mental illness” (p 92). “They cycle between the streets, jails, hospitals, and halfway houses, and there are few [treatment] openings in any of those places” (p 95).

Shellenberger also questions the assertion that “poverty, trauma, and structural racism cause addiction” by claiming that “over the same period, poverty, trauma, and racism declined”. As to poverty, he cites statistics that US per capita income more than doubled over the last 50 years. Then, ironically, he acknowledges that poverty does still have a

big role: “Just 2% of Americans who graduate from high school, live in a family with at least one full time worker, and wait to have children until turning 21 and marrying, in what is known as the ‘success sequence’, live in poverty” (p 126).

But he fails to note that real median wages have increased only about 15% since 1980 (economic policy institute on swa-wages-2019) indicating that individual working people will often have a tough time finding housing without government assistance due to housing costs far outstripping wages. He wants to say that if you’re in trouble and homeless, you’re likely not the victim of system of that discriminates against you, but of ideologies and practices that don’t help you. Yet this anemic wage growth has been a direct result of the economic ideology of the ruling elites referred to “neoliberal globalization” - to capture most of the growth in GDP for themselves and the top 10%, with only crumbs for the bottom 50%.

As to crime, he says that “one researcher has estimated that swift, certain, and fair [sentencing] could halve the US prison population” (p 201), simply by deterring crime, as demonstrated by New York City. In other words, not “defund the police” but better policing, especially in poor neighborhoods of color, such as in Oakland.

Shellenberger notes that victimology is counterproductive – “it robs victims of their

moral agency and creates double standards that frustrate any attempt to criticize their behavior, even if they’re behaving in self-destructive, anti-social ways... appealing to emotion, overriding reason and logic”. In fact “charity, and acting from altruism more broadly, has long had a dark side” (p 217) – the manipulation of compassionate, idealistic people by demagogues through the ages. He devotes a whole chapter to the example of Jim Jones.

Thus Shellenberger makes many good points but misses critical parts of the big picture.

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