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THE JUSTICE
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THE MAJORITY OF CALIFORNIA RESIDENTS SUPPORT HOUSING AS A HUMAN RIGHT

May 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November of 2019, a group of us,—mothers and our children—those of us who would later become known as [Moms 4 Housing](#), moved into a house on Magnolia Street in Oakland that had been vacant for two years. Our decision was a practical one—we needed a place to raise our children. Homelessness was taking an incalculable toll on our families. As Dominique Walker explained, “You don’t fully realize the toll homelessness has on your family until you then can see your 18-month old son finally start walking or hear your daughter say she can now do homework when you finally do have a home.”

But moving into that house was also a political act, a protest against the ease with which elected officials have for so long ignored the growing number of people who live on the edge of homelessness. Oakland, like the rest of the Bay Area, has become outrageously expensive. Lifetime residents suddenly find themselves priced out by profit-seeking speculators. Oakland has over 15,000 [vacant properties](#) even as thousands are homeless. The Magnolia Street houses we moved into had been left intentionally vacant by Wedgewood Properties, a real-estate investment group, which purchases properties only to turn a profit and displaces families along the way.

We were inspired by previous protests against the greed of Wall Street, but our protest was also unique. “Moms House,” as we called it, was a true group effort. We worked with local activists including Alliance of Californians for Community Empowerment to amplify our message and show our community that we could [stand up](#) for the rights of people who are historically dispossessed.

In January 2020, deputies from the Alameda Sheriff’s Department forcibly evicted us, throwing all of our belongings and furniture into the street. Four women were arrested. We were forced to scatter, some of us returning to our cars when shelter was scarce. True, we had been breaking the law. But that’s not the real crime. As one of our members told [The Guardian](#), “The true crime lies in this society that we live in that can normalize people living in the street. Shelter is a human right. It’s needed to protect yourself from the elements, and it shouldn’t be commodified.”

There is good news: the vast majority of people understand that housing is a human right and want to see legislation and policies that make the right a reality. In light of COVID-19 and the onslaught of job loss—in addition to health and safety policies that require social distancing—lawmakers, advocates, and community members recognize that housing must be provided not just to protect individual families; it’s also for the common good and everyone’s survival.

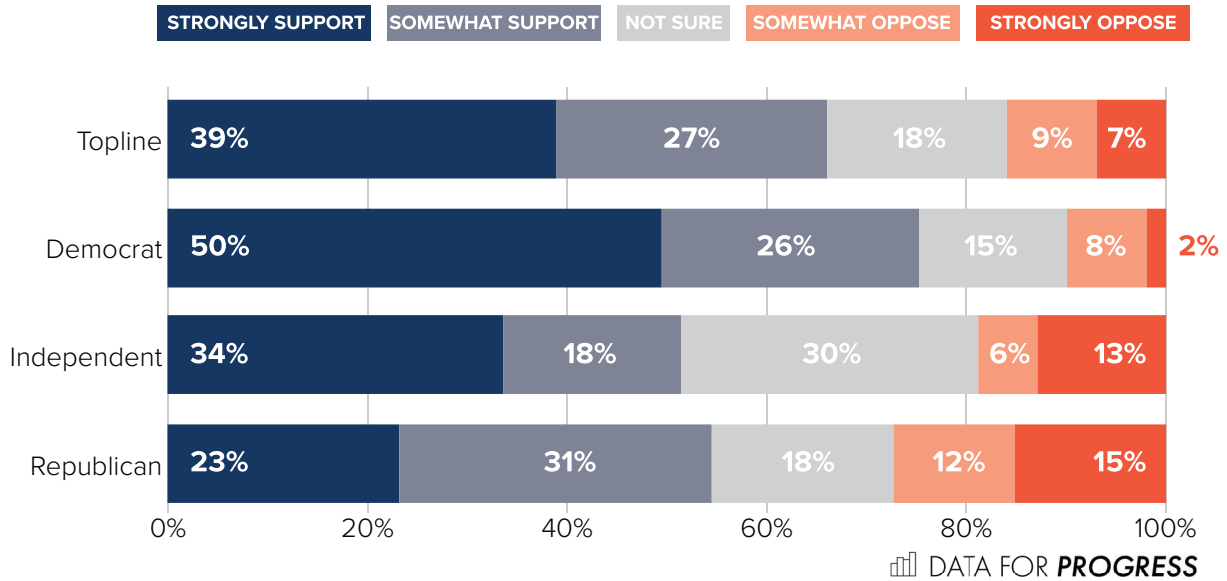
The Majority of Californians Agree With Us

We founded Moms 4 Housing on a [belief](#) that housing is a human right. And now, it’s proven that the majority of people agree with us. This was echoed by Governor Gavin Newsom’s council on homelessness, which [wrote in January of this year](#), “The state must establish in law that it is not morally or legally acceptable to deny housing for people.”

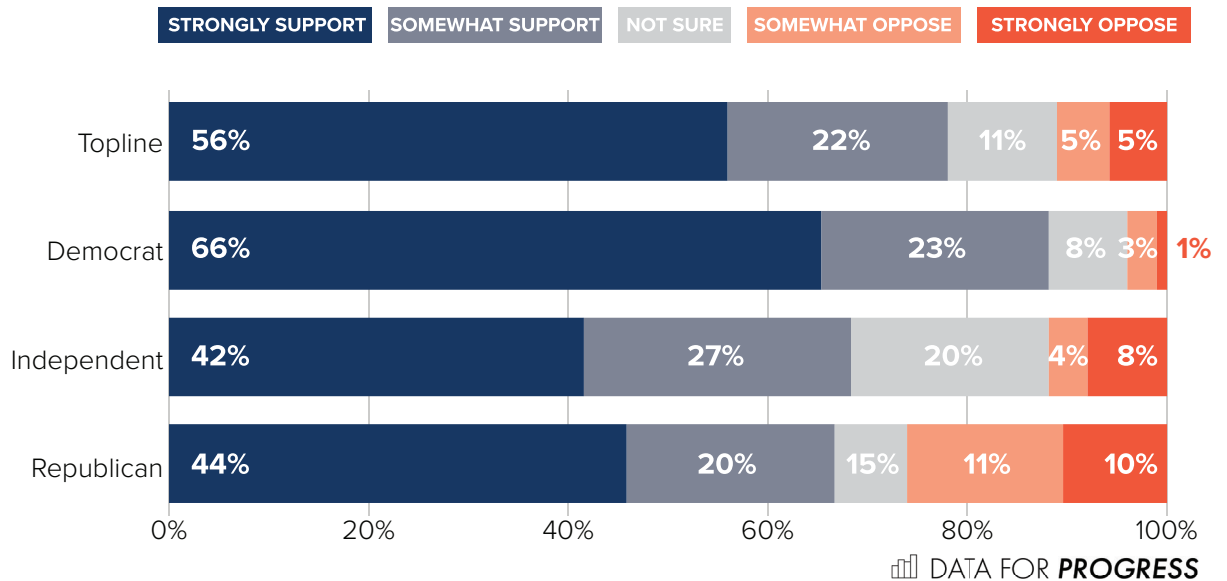
Today, people recognize that housing is an important human right and necessary to ensure the safety and health of all. Polling by Data for Progress found that 56% of all respondents—including 54% of people who identify as

Republican—would support amending the California constitution to establish a fundamental human right to housing. Only 7% of those polled strongly opposed such an amendment.

Do you support or oppose amending the California constitution to establish a fundamental human right to housing?



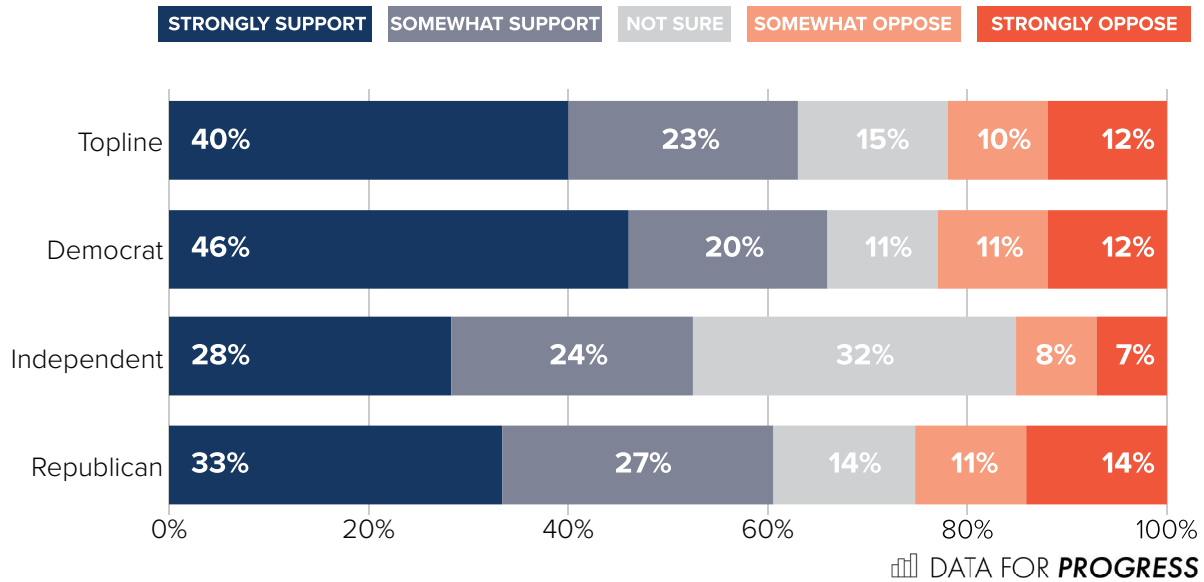
Do you support or oppose a pending California bill that would “declare that it is the policy of the state that every child and family has the right to safe, decent, and affordable housing”?



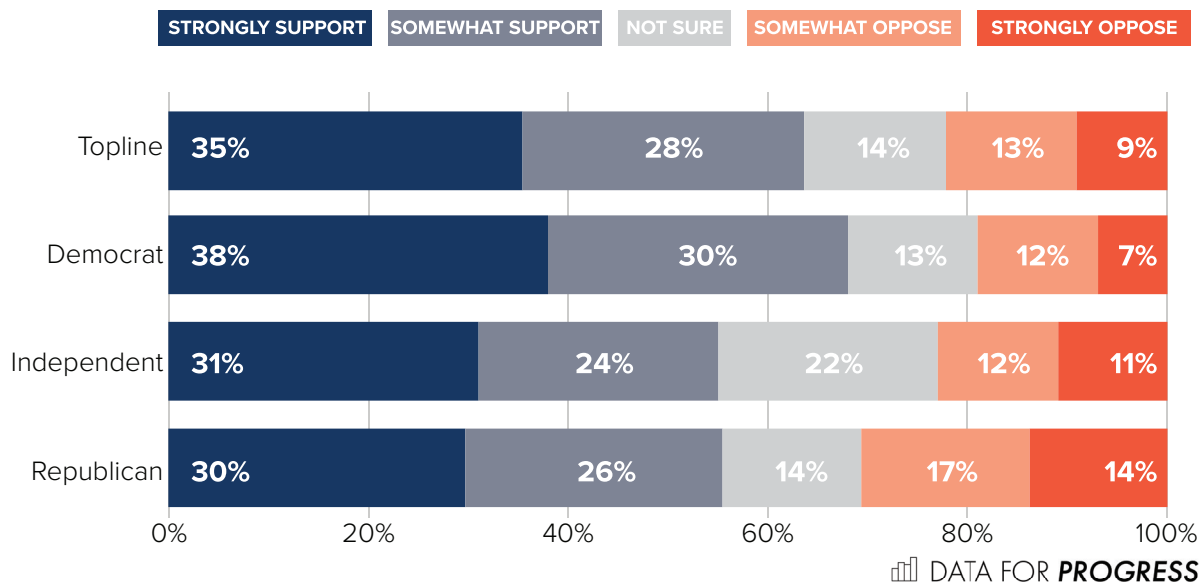
Additionally, 79% of respondents strongly or somewhat supported legislation in California that would support a policy providing every child and

family the right to safe, decent, and affordable housing. Only 5% of respondents strongly opposed such legislation.

A group of homeless mother, known as *Moms 4 Housing*, are moving mothers and their children into vacant homes in Oakland and Los Angeles. Would you support or oppose a a ban on forcibly evicting women and children for as long as there remains a state of emergency?



Would you support or oppose a pathway for the women and children to live in the homes on a permanent basis?



We know that the coronavirus pandemic will impact millions of families, many of whom have nowhere to live. Taking care of the homeless is now a necessary step to protect our families and our futures.

The Homelessness Crisis

Politicians have been talking about ending homelessness for 80 years, but it's rarely progressed beyond talk. Today, there are more than 560,000 people experiencing homelessness—meaning they lack a fixed address—in this country, and over 150,000 are in California.

Californians have experienced a surge of homelessness over the past ten years. Governor Gavin Newsom acknowledges this and blames institutional failure in the government. He declared that ending homelessness was a top priority for his administration. Yet, his response, along with Oakland Mayor Libby Schaaf, was to ship trailers to a vacant lot. Temporary solutions will not solve structural problems.

Homelessness can happen to anyone, but families of color are disproportionately the ones who bear the burden of high housing costs. While 6.5% of California's population is Black, 40% of the homeless population is. In Oakland, 70% of homeless residents are Black. A 2018 report by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority concluded, "The impact of institutional and structural racism in education, criminal justice, housing, employment, health care, and access to opportunities cannot be denied: homelessness is a by-product of racism in America."

The ineffective government response is due in large part to the myths many people tell themselves about being homeless. For example, some may argue that homelessness is a result of being unemployed. But the truth is simple.

People are homeless because they cannot afford their rent or mortgage on the salaries they make. U.C.L.A. economist William Yu conducted a 2018 study that found a direct correlation between the high costs of housing and high rates of homelessness. In other words, people are homeless because they don't make enough to pay their rent. In California, the median home cost is over \$570,000 and median rent is \$2775. This means 1.5 million people in the state spent over 50 percent of their income on rent.

Why now?

While the problem of unaffordable housing isn't new, there's renewed interest in the topic as America's economy seems poised to plunge into a deep depression the likes of which no one has ever seen. We already see the many people who have joined the movement for affordable housing by asking for moratoriums on rent and mortgage payments out of pure necessity. And the truth is that the nation cannot heal until people are safely housed.

Experiencing homelessness means more than not having a place to sleep. It means you cannot be safe. For us, the Magnolia Street homes were a place to protect our kids and give them stability. It is hard to make meals or get dressed for work without a home. It's hard to feel safe and secure without a home. The terror of receiving an eviction notice turns your world upside down.

One thing the current crisis has laid bare is how important affordable and safe housing is for everyone in the community, housed and unhoused. California's housing crisis was already at a breaking point and now, with over one million people in California who have filed for unemployment since the start of the pandemic, we can see how unsustainable housing prices are for everyone. All across California, there have been

protests and rent strikes as community members band together to protest the predator practices of corporate landlords and regulations that favor the wealthy. We support these efforts and acknowledge that they come from the same root of our own protest.

The pandemic is also revealing that homes are also necessary for everyone's physical health. Sleeping on the street without clean bathrooms or running water exacerbates the spread of disease. People without shelter cannot "shelter in place." They must, by the very fact of their homelessness, interact with large numbers of people without the ability to protect themselves from a dangerous virus. And, people who are physically ill cannot recover without a home.

While this moment is unique, it's important to remember that the burden of an overpriced housing market didn't just happen because of the virus. It was an unsustainable system that had reached a crisis before coronavirus devastated our communities. The good news is that we can seize upon this time as a moment to move towards equality.

A home is a human right

No one in the United States should have to be homeless. Living inside a vacant house may be an individual crime. But when thousands and thousands of people in California end each day without a home, that is an injustice that should not be tolerated. Our officials should focus far more on ending the injustice of homelessness than a person's crime of watching to be safe.

Housing as a human right would make government officials and elected leaders accountable for their decisions. No longer can

our leaders look the other way. Instead, they must use the best evidence-based methods available to make housing available for all, including land trust grants and other options to allow for collectives to purchase and rent housing at affordable prices. We are not so naive that this can be done instantly. But, we have already seen the power of community action. People have sought rent abatement through strikes and public outcry. These are real changes that impact policy.

Osha Neuman, an attorney with the East Bay Community Law Center, said, "If someone has a right to life, someone has a right to what is required to live that life." Housing is required for life. The government's job in a time of crisis is to preserve life. We are sad it took a pandemic for people to see that housing must be for everyone or no one is safe. But, sometimes a time of crisis can crystalize for everyone the importance of providing families the ability to thrive.

We and our supporters believe that housing is a human right. Without meaningful changes to the California constitution and impactful legislation, this idea will remain just another talking point for politicians. And if this pandemic has taught us anything, it's that now more than ever we need to be able to secure housing for everyone for the safety of all.

METHODOLOGY

From March 27, 2020 to March 28, 2020, Data for Progress conducted a survey of 2022 likely voters in California using web panel respondents. The sample was weighted to be representative of likely voters by age, gender, education, urbanicity, race, and voting history. The survey was conducted in English. The margin of error is ± 2.1 percent.