Why It Won't Ever Be 2019 Again: Guessing How COVID Will Change Homelessness

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Abstract_ *Some of the changes that were adopted because of the pandemic will outlast the pandemic. Most notably, houses will be used for more purposes. This will probably increase the price of housing and so induce an increase in homelessness if policies do not respond appropriately. The rules of thumb and ways of thinking that worked pre-COVID will probably not work post-COVID.*

Keywords_ *post-COVID, Homelessness, Land Value*

Introduction

We all know now that the volume of homelessness in a society depends not so much on the volume of pathologies in that society but on how the society is organised and how it works, especially how housing markets work. It follows that if a society changes, homelessness will change too. Since January 2020, all of our societies have changed immensely. Some of those changes are probably temporary, but others are probably not. Toothpaste does not go back into the tube after you stop squeezing it. Some of these long-lasting changes affect us in some of the most fundamental ways possible: what we think we can do with our lives, what we think about other people, and what we think other people think about people and the world around them. So, housing and homelessness will change too. This article explores what those changes are likely to be and how we should react. I'm not a prophet or a fortune-teller. I don't play the stock market or bet on football games. I'm probably wrong. But we need to start thinking about the long-term implications of COVID for housing and homelessness now, rather than wait for someone to receive a divine revelation.

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Changes in Capabilities

Recurrent outbreaks of respiratory illness are likely to continue for a decade or more after the main pandemic. Schroeder et al. (2021) found that the probability of influenza outbreaks and influenza mortality were elevated for more than a decade in the US and Britain following the epidemics of 1890-91 and 1918-19. Even if it ends soon, the pandemic will probably induce some long-term changes in people's bodies and minds. Long COVID, for instance, may leave a large number of people with reduced capabilities for the rest of their lives, and the losses in learning that children have experienced at key points in their development may turn out to be irreversible. But it is probably too early to tell. Damage *in utero* is also possible. Children who were *in utero* during the 1918-19 pandemic in the US had "reduced educational attainment, increased rates of physical disability, lower income, lower socioeconomic status, and higher transfer payments" in the 1960-1980 censuses (Almond, 2006, p.672). There is no comparable evidence for COVID, but of course it is early. If any of these trends develop, they are likely to show up among the next generation of homeless people.

Changes in What we Use Housing For

For me, it seems that the most profound changes that the pandemic has wrought are to what we use things for. As an individual, for instance, I don't want a computer just to have it or to be known as a computer owner. I want it because of what I think I can do with it, and I want to do those things not just to do them, but because of what the doing of them means for my life and the lives of those I care about. We often think of these relationships between things and purposes as stable and settled—chairs are for sitting on and shoes are for wearing on your feet—but in fact they are not. Consider my slide rule. A long time ago, I used it for making calculations quickly and accurately. Today, I keep it for sentimental reasons and to start conversations. The pandemic has shaken up many of these relationships between objects and purposes very quickly. For people who care about homelessness, the most important relationships shaken up are those with housing. The uses of housing have never been stable. Two hundred years ago a lot of people thought of houses as places to keep pigs and chickens, not microwaves and Pelotons. The shake-ups we are experiencing now are big and fast.

Housing has always served many purposes. When I taught housing economics, I usually started by spending 15 minutes going over a long list that had mainly been stable for years. Defining homelessness is hard because the list is so long and because people disagree about which items on the list are more important. One of the beauties of the ETHOS typology is that it enumerates quite a few of the reasons

why people used to want homes. For many people (not necessarily all), the pandemic has added to the list of reasons to want housing. In this section, I consider a dozen of them.

Start with the use of houses as workplaces, since this expanded use has seen the most attention, both scholarly and popular. Before the pandemic, almost everyone did some work at home, even if it was as little as getting dressed for work or thinking about work problems. During the pandemic, working from home (WFH) skyrocketed, but as a temporary expedient. But this expedient is no longer temporary; ending the pandemic will not completely reverse this process. The toothpaste does not go back into the tube when the pandemic stops squeezing. How the pandemic changed WFH forever is a story whose main features I will repeat many times and so I want to go into some detail now. The temporary expedient induced three permanent changes.

First, many people invested in skills and equipment needed to work at home. Everyone learned Zoom and chat, of course, but people also upgraded their connectivity, purchased headphones and cameras, changed around their lighting and background, and bought new computers.

Second, innovation occurred, and quality improved greatly. Before the pandemic, remote meeting and working technology was a technological backwater, without even reasonable security protocols. Hardly anybody used it, and companies invested little in improving it. Companies invested little in improving it because hardly anybody used it. That all changed with the pandemic. The technology for remote work is much better today than it was before the pandemic—and a lot better than it would have been absent the pandemic.

Third, the problems of transition and coordination were eliminated because everybody moved at the same time --- they had no choice. Without the pandemic, 'first-mover disadvantage' might have kept the world from learning about remote work forever. Before the pandemic, a lone worker or even a lone firm that decided to work remotely would be taking a big risk: they would have to invest in the technology, but if no one else followed, they would have no one to have remote meetings with, and they would probably be labelled as a shirker. The same problem exists still in decisions of victims of serial sexual harassers—the first woman to come forward is likely to be vilified and discredited unless other women come forward pretty quickly (Ayres and Unkovic, 2012). The pandemic eliminated first-mover disadvantage because everybody moved at the same time, and nobody ever has to worry about being the first mover again.

What happened next is also a common story—WFH turned out to not be bad in all dimensions for all people. The big advantage is that it reduces commuting costs and time—clothing costs, too. Some workers appreciate the flexibility. Remote work appears to be more egalitarian: polls find that women and people of colour tend to favor remote work more than others (Pelta, 2021; Tulshyan, 2021; Wong, 2021). And a lot of work can get done at home—more than most people probably thought. Remote work is not perfect for every purpose (dentists and butchers, for instance, cannot work from home), and it is pretty poor even for many purposes with which it is being used now (Zoom calls for mass firings are an outstanding example). What is important is that WFH is good for some people and for some purposes, and the investments and the coordinated move have made it much easier to use going forward.

Barrero et al. (2021) estimate that about 20% of workers will continue with WFH, and that many people will work from home one or two days a week, and that is only during normal times. Even people who say that they will return to the office are not all going to push their way in when blizzards or hurricanes hit, or tornadoes are forecast. People who go to the office when they are sick will be treated as pariahs, not as heroes. So even those who will think of themselves as full-time office workers will need space and equipment at home to handle bad weather, emergencies, and illnesses. This demand for being able to work at home has implications for housing markets. Pre-pandemic, workers who worked from home needed more space at home and had bigger houses than similar workers who did not (Stanton and Tiwari, 2021). Post pandemic, people will spend more time working from home than they did pre-pandemic, and so they will want (and be willing to pay for) bigger houses to work in. These changes will probably increase productivity. Barrero et al. (2021) estimate a 5% increase in productivity from WFH, but Behrens et al. (2021) raise questions about all of these gains.

WFH is not the only area where this dynamic will play out. I can think of 11 other similar stories.

1. *Epidemiological safety.* This has long been a reason to want a house, but it had so faded from public consciousness before the pandemic that neither ETHOS nor I included it in our lists. At the start of the pandemic, we were all taught to hunker down at home with a small number of people whom we trusted. Post pandemic, this reason will fade in immediate importance, but as Schroeder et al. (2021) point out, more than the usual number of outbreaks will probably continue for decades. Since many people will worry about future pandemics even if they do not occur, houses will continue to be a form of epidemiological insurance.

2. *Schools for children.* Brick and mortar schools will of course reopen, but it will not be 2019 again. At the very least there will be no snow days when all learning stops, and the weather bar required to move classes online will be a lot lower

than the bar that used to be required to declare a snow day. Some classes will be offered only online because brick and mortar schools will not have reasonable numbers. Why can't high schools teach Urdu, now, for instance, if a virtual class can be gathered from several brick-and-mortar schools? There will be some great teaching available online, and some parents will want to take advantage of it even if schools do not. Some students do better online. Finally, kids with the flu will not be allowed in many schools—why should they be? These advantages of remote learning may not be enough to make up for the chaotic losses that current cohorts of schoolchildren suffered in the pandemic, but they may make schooling better for future cohorts.

3. *Schools for adults*. The advantages for adults of going to school at home are going to continue. Getting to a community college after work to learn coding or prepare for an accounting exam is a trying experience for many. Many institutions learned how to give these courses online during the pandemic, and that knowledge will not disappear. Larger classes can be assembled if students do not have to travel. A lot more adults will be able to pick up new skills when they can do so at their own pace in their own place. This should increase productivity.

4. *Entertainment centers.* Movie theaters? Maybe some of them will survive. But still many people will want to watch movies at home, especially in bad weather, and many more first-run movies will be available for viewing at home. The equipment is there now, in many cases, and so is the knowledge of how to use it. Movies will continue to be made for home consumption. Other forms of entertainment will continue at home too. There will be in-person concerts, but some people will still want to watch some livestreamed concerts, for instance. Family reunions, weddings, funerals, and wakes will probably continue mainly to be in person, but for some people at some times—especially those with family dispersed around the globe—the opportunity to mark these events remotely will be very appealing now that the stigma attached to online has been reduced. It will not seem strange any longer to have an online wedding, guests will understand how to log in and how to celebrate, and wedding planners now have skill and experience in planning these events.

5. *Exercise areas.* The equipment is there, and will not go away, and many people are used to Pelotons and Zumba over the internet. Trainers now know how to conduct their sessions online and how to get paid for them. The old ways will not disappear—you cannot recreate a hard-core gym at home—but the new ways will not disappear either.

6. *Civic, religious, and political forums*. Almost all civic, religious, and political life went online during the pandemic, and now that many organisations and members have the skills and equipment it will not all return. *Robert's Rules,* for instance, came out with a new edition that includes rules for electronic meetings. The absence of rules made holding formal meetings online challenging before the pandemic, but after the pandemic those rules will not disappear. During the pandemic, many organisations had surprising successes. The Biden campaign and transition, for instance, was conducted almost entirely online, and it was successful in ways that no one had anticipated. The Newark History Society had in-person meetings before COVID with 50-80 people in attendance; online meetings during COVID have often had 200 or more people attending. Some states in the US are now requiring local governments to continue providing remote access to their meetings, and groups in other states are campaigning for such a requirement (Best Best and Krieger, 2021; Rode, 2021).

7. *Health care*. Telehealth did not make as much progress during the pandemic as many other online endeavors, but it made some, and they will not be reversed. The rules in many nations were changed to permit telehealth, at least for the emergency, some physicians have developed skill, and new uses (for instance, rural households) continue to be found.

8. *Delivery destinations*. Many people turned to deliveries to replace brick and mortar retail experiences, and a large structure was developed to facilitate deliveries initiated online, while some brick-and-mortar operations have gone out of business. Many people have found that they like deliveries, and getting your groceries delivered is no longer considered decadent in some communities. Deliveries need destinations, and homes are the destinations. Single family homes need porches, and apartment buildings need storage space.

9. *Warehouses*. Many people stockpiled at the start of the pandemic. Sudden shifts in demand and sudden interruptions to supply caused shortages or anticipated shortages, and so stockpiling was not an irrational response then. Recent months have seen further shortages. It is easier to stockpile if you can get stuff delivered and do not have to schlepp it yourself. Stockpiling requires a place to store, and homes supplied the place to store. The experience of the past two years has taught many people to be wary of future shortages, and so does climate change—the anticipation of extreme weather often triggers stockpiling and shortages, and climate change is increasing the frequency of extreme weather. Many people will want more room to stockpile.

10. *Nursing homes*. At least a quarter of the Americans who died from COVID up to November 2021 were residents of nursing homes (Long Term Care COVID Tracker, 2021). About 0.4% of Americans are residents of nursing homes

(Koerber and Wilson, 2021). Most of us realise today that it is not a great idea to put the oldest, sickest, frailest citizens into a congregate care setting where they can all get the same disease at the same time or cannot be rapidly evacuated. So, nursing homes are going to shrink, if not disappear. What will replace them? Home care, which was already growing at the expense of congregate care before the pandemic in many developed countries. Achou et al. (2021) found in a Canadian poll that 72% of respondents in their 50s and 60s were less likely to enter a nursing home because of their COVID experience. These respondents are saving more, and most would support greater government subsidies to home health care. For home care, you need a home. The end of the pandemic will not reverse the new fear of nursing homes.

11. *Protection from weather*. Not directly related to the pandemic, and protection from weather has long been among the reasons why people want housing, but as we all know climate is getting worse in many parts of the world, and so there's a lot more weather to protect people from. Climate change interacts with many of the other reasons for housing: the worse the weather outside, the more house you want to do your work, to go to school, to exercise safely, to participate with your community, and so on.

Are there offsetting changes? Yes, but probably not as large. There are fewer children, at least for the next few years, and maybe longer if raising a child requires a lot more house. A physical address is no longer necessary for many purposes because a phone takes its place, but this change occurred before the pandemic. Probably the biggest offsetting changes have taken place in fintech—people are holding much less cash, and so have less need of places to hold their cash safely. What they need to protect instead are passwords and cards. Unfortunately, good ways of protecting passwords and cards do not appear to be developing quickly, but they might.

Direct Implications for Homeless Services

What are the implications for homelessness? The least important is that ETHOS should be revisited, probably with a particular emphasis on technology. The FEANTSA reports in the last several years on information and communications technology are a big step in this direction (FEANTSA, 2013; 2021). Bekasi et al. (2021), for instance, describe how telemedicine can be used to help homeless people.

More immediately, emergency accommodations, social housing, and everything in between will have to be designed with these uses in mind. Housing means something different now, and so does homelessness.

Treating homelessness will probably cost more—but it will do more too. Goals that used to be pursued through the State's health, education, employment, and cultural budgets, for instance, will best be pursued in housing and homelessness (just as employers who think WFH will reduce their real estate costs will probably end up paying directly or indirectly for their workers' larger homes and improved connectivity). The State, for instance, can hire great teachers and equip them with great lesson plans, but if kids do not have good internet connections and quiet places to connect from, it would not make any difference during a large part of the school year.

Indirect Implications of Increased Demand for Housing

As an economist, I am also interested in the indirect implications of the new and expanded uses of housing—and not just for people experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness. Indeed, most of the increased demand for housing is going to come in the middle and especially the upper parts of the income distribution. Economists have found it useful to think of houses as a combination of structure and land. Structure is what goes into building a house or apartment; land is where it is, and what else cannot be near it.

Structure usually has less impact on the rest of the world than land. The inputs to structure are labor, concrete, steel, plaster, wood, and so on, and the supply of those things can expand pretty easily in the long run without raising price much. There may be lumber or cement shortages now and then, but in the long run your building a deck is not going to make my table cost more. Outside the market one person's structure can affect others some—if it blocks their light or offends their aesthetic sensibilities, for instance—but that effect is limited, especially if the structure in question is not close to the places the other people in question never go, or if the structure is interior or in a backyard.

Land, on the other hand, cannot be expanded even in the long run and does affect millions of people pretty directly, although they usually do not recognise it. The amount of land within one kilometer of Times Square is going to be 3.14 square kilometers whether the price is high or low. Every additional lot or expanded lot between my house and Columbia means I have to travel further. Every additional or expanded lot between my house and reservoir means that the pipe to my house has to be longer, and every additional or expanded lot between my house and hospital means that the ambulance has to travel further (both coming and going).

The bottom line is that if the demand for more home offices, schools, gyms, and so on translates into more structure—adding a home office at the back of an existing house, for instance—then it's unlikely to raise rents except for the affected property.

On the other hand, if demand for more housing translates into demand for more or bigger lots, then rents for everyone housed will rise, because everyone housed uses some land. That is how the changing uses of housing can affect homelessness.

Will the new uses for housing by upper- and middle-income people come on net more from structure or more from land? I don't know. It is likely to be some from each, and so some part of the increased demand for housing is going to result in higher rents and more homelessness. But policies can probably affect how much.

Climate change is also going to affect future rents. Climate change will render some land unusable for housing, which may increase the price of the remaining land. Better storm sewers also make land more expensive, and greater storm water retention requirements may increase demand for land per house. If large parts of the Earth are rendered uninhabitable, land prices in the remaining habitable parts will rise. But climate change will also make structure more expensive: better insulation, stronger windows, more water-tight basements, and possibly more elevated structures.

Of course, there are countertrends that may operate in the other direction. The most frequently mentioned countertrends are the obvious conservation-of-space considerations: if activities shift into houses, they have to leave somewhere else. So, the post pandemic world, in this view, will have fewer movie theaters, nursing homes, brick and mortar stores, and offices, for instance. This land, and maybe even these buildings, can become housing.

For most items on this list, I think this is true, and policy should encourage it. But I don't think it's enough. There are two reasons: relative magnitudes and office expansion.

First, relative magnitude. Consider New York City, because I am familiar with the data, and the two least dense parts of NYC, Queens and Staten Island. Even though New York as a whole has the greatest amount of commercial and office activity in the United States by far, about 10 times as much land is used for residences as for stores and offices (New York City Department of City Planning, 2013). In Queens and Staten Island, which are more like the rest of the developed world than Manhattan is, the ratios are 14 times and 11 times, respectively. To offset an increase of 10% in the amount of land used for housing, commercial, and office activity would have to be wiped out.

Second, office expansion. For cities like New York, Los Angeles, London, Dublin, Amsterdam, Milan, Frankfurt, and Paris, I do not think offices will contract; office employment and income will probably grow in the long run.

The intuition is that city size is determined by a battle between agglomeration and congestion. Agglomeration means that for certain activities if a lot of people are working in close proximity to each other, they can accomplish a lot more per capita;

more people makes things better. Agglomeration is a very strong force; it is a major part of the reason why wages in Paris are about 15% higher than wages in other French cities and 60% higher than wages in French rural areas (Combes et al., 2008). Wages in the largest cities in China are about 30% higher than wages in medium-sized cities and more than 50% higher than rural wages (Peng, 2019), and tiny houses in Silicon Valley cost over a million euros.[1] Congestion means that the more people living and working in the same area, the more they get in each other's way, both literally and figuratively: longer commutes, loss of privacy, crowding, contagion, crime, noise, just general nastiness. Agglomeration makes cities good places to live and work and so attracts people to cities; congestion does the opposite and repels them. As the balance between these forces shifts, city size shifts and rent responds.

Obviously, COVID itself belongs to the congestion side of the ledger, and that is why the great cities of Europe and North America are still pretty deserted now. But sooner or later, some combination of medical ingenuity, herd immunity, and luck will drive COVID and its variants into abeyance. The long-term question is what the effect of remote work technologies will be. In my mind, they reduce congestion, just like a new subway system does. If you go to the office three days a week rather than five, your weekly cost of commuting has fallen by 40%. Cheaper commutes imply bigger metropolitan areas, and greater gains from agglomeration. Zoom is just another step in the progress we have made over the last several centuries by separating activities and specialising by location. Work that does not have to get done in the centre of the city should not get done in the centre of the city. The huge productivity gains cities like Paris realise would be unimaginable if every household had to have its own cow, chickens, and vegetable garden. New York could not operate the way it does if everybody who worked in midtown had to exercise there, shower there, send their kids to school there, vacation there, and be buried there.

On the other hand, bigger cities imply higher rent and higher rent implies more homelessness. Empty offices are not going to offset the increased demand for housing because they are not going to be empty. For the biggest, most spectacular cities—the places where homelessness was rising fastest pre-pandemic in the US and in most of Europe—the effect is probably going to be the opposite.

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1 A house in Palo Alto with under 122 square meters was being offered for €1 284 million in December 2021 (Your Home in Silicon Valley, 2021).

What to Do?

So, I am not optimistic about homelessness in the post pandemic world. Many of the new technologies are wonderful and they are going to enrich the lives of many people, including many people listening today. But they probably will not reduce homelessness. COVID is not your friend. My picture of the post-COVID world has (1) more uses of housing, and more housing per capita; (2) higher wages and employment, and generally greater prosperity; (3) continuing difficulties with public health and with people who have suffered permanent damage from the pandemic; and (4) higher rents and housing costs. These features do not have to imply greater homelessness, but they will if policies are not adjusted. I do not have a detailed plan for the post-COVID world. Remember we are just starting to think about this world—in December 2019 there wasn't even a word "COVID." COVID has also taught us not to make plans that we cannot change. I cannot tell you what I will be doing in six months. But I have some general recommendations.

For advocates and researchers, please do not use old mechanical measures like poverty is half of median income or everyone should spend a third of their income on housing. Start with what really matters and build from there. One of the main messages in this article should be that what people need to live minimally decent lives has changed because the world has changed, and it costs more. Everyone needs an appropriate COVID vaccine, and a booster shot (or two). Families with kids are not housed unless they have good internet access, and older people in southern Europe are not housed unless they have air conditioning. Maybe northern Europe too. Total lack of internet access is social exclusion. Everybody needs a plan to escape from disastrous weather. This costs money. We have to deal with it intelligently.

For policy generally, look to land. The wonderful new technologies are inducing wild changes in land values. There have been and will be great windfalls in many of the same metropolitan areas where homelessness will rise. A heavy tax on land values is not only a good way to finance the response to homelessness, but also a good way to channel the growth of housing demand into structures instead of land. Remote work and other new technologies make income and sales taxes, and many other traditional taxes less effective and more distortionary, and so land taxes would be needed even without the great windfalls and growing needs. This is not a new idea; it was developed by Henry George in 1879 in one of the most popular books in the US in the 19th century.

In general, remember that we got through the pandemic so far by being flexible and imaginative, by embracing new technology, and by spending a lot of money. Do not expect the post pandemic to be a lot different. Whenever it arrives.

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