

HOMELESSNESS FAQs

Numbers in () indicate references in final pages.

What causes homelessness?

The causes of homelessness are complex and varied, and any specific individual's final homelessness status may be due to one or a series of events or conditions. Among them are addictive disabilities, mental or physical illness, bankruptcy due to medical bills, loss of employment, domestic violence, and insufficient access to affordable housing. Although rental increases are currently slowing down in the Seattle area, MarketWatch in February 2018 found that Seattle rentals increased 39.8% in the last five years. (1)

Those increases, along with job losses during the recession that many have not recovered from, force many people into homelessness. Eviction due to inability to pay increased rent is an increasing cause of homelessness. A September 2018 report by the Seattle Women's Commission, found that 37.5% of households in Seattle who experienced eviction ended up unsheltered and another 25% moved into shelter or transitional housing. (2)

Just 12.5% of evicted tenants in Seattle moved into another form of permanent housing; an eviction on your rental record makes it extremely difficult to regain housing. Katie Wilson of the Transit Riders Union has said, "With a countywide homeless population well over 10,000, and 75,000-plus more extremely low-income households severely cost-burdened by rent, the scale of the need for deeply affordable homes is mind-boggling." (3) Rising rents are closely related to increases in homelessness. (4)

Who are the people experiencing homelessness in our community?

Every year, King County joins most other major governmental authorities (termed "Continuum of Care") in the country to count people experiencing homelessness. These counts are only estimates because some unsheltered individuals hide from being seen. Individuals counted were found in indoor shelters, transitional housing, sanctioned encampments and tiny house villages,

safe havens (supportive housing for severely mentally-ill individuals, now no longer newly-built), vehicles, abandoned buildings, and the street.

King County's 2019 point-in-time count was held in the early morning hours of January 25, 2019 and later supplemented by daytime counts of individuals in indoor shelters, transitional housing, and safe havens. (5) The total for sheltered and unsheltered people experiencing homelessness was 11,199. Some data points from the 2019 count:

- The total of homeless persons showed a decrease of 8% over 2018.
- Forty-seven percent of that total were unsheltered, a decrease of 5% over 2018. Newly included in sheltered were Tiny House Village residents, which reduced the unsheltered count.
- Seattle – the county's largest city – was the residence of 68% of the county's unsheltered population.
- Follow-up surveys found that people of color, American and Alaskan natives, LGBTQ+ individuals (especially youth and young adults), and domestic violence victims and their children experienced homelessness in numbers disproportionate to their percentage of the population.

How many people who are currently homeless in Seattle/King County were living here when they became homeless?

Although it's often thought that homeless people travel to areas where they believe benefits might be more generous, that is seldom the case in King County. During the 2019 count survey, conducted after the nighttime count, approximately 84% of respondents reported living in Seattle/King County immediately prior to loss of housing. Eleven percent (11%) of survey respondents lived in another Washington county prior to loss of housing, while 5% were residing out of state. Fifty-two percent (52%) of survey respondents reported living in Seattle at the time of their housing loss.

Why has Seattle's spending on homelessness not solved the crisis?

There are a number of reasons. First, Seattle spends more on emergency services (indoor shelters, rental assistance, sanctioned encampments, and tiny house villages) than it does for

permanent low-income housing (supportive or non-supportive). The biennial Seattle budget passed in November 2018 included no additional housing funding; in fact, it decreased 2019 spending from that in 2018, and depended upon funding sources other than direct expenditures from Seattle resources. Despite recommendations for increased housing services by consultant Barbara Poppe & Associates 2016 in a report entitled “The Path Forward for the City of Seattle”, the city has ceased to meet the demand of a steadily growing homeless population. (6)

Both housing and emergency shelter are needed, but a governmental entity must plan for and fund a steady transition from shelter to housing. Two years after her report, in December, 2018, Poppe told the Seattle Times that “The greater challenges of really addressing the affordable-rental-housing crisis and making it possible for, in particular families, to exit homelessness to stable housing, progress was made, but not to the scale of what the needs were.” (7) From Katie Wilson: “Knowing what works is one thing; grappling with the scale of the need and resources required to match it is quite another. As housing costs have soared over the past decade, policy makers have been unwilling to do this. As a result, they haven’t been able to form a coherent plan to address homelessness.” (3) Increasingly, Seattle’s older affordable rental housing has been bought by developers and razed to make way for market-rate development. According to a study reported by the National Low Income Housing Coalition in February 2018, Seattle had only 29 affordable units for every 100 extremely low-income households, below the national average of 35 per 100. (8) Additionally, according to a December 2018 Zillow report entitled “Priced Out”, Seattle is part of a cluster of large cities – also including New York, Boston, and Los Angeles – where renters earning the area’s median income, much higher in major municipalities than in smaller areas, spend more than 32 percent of their income on rent. (9) Almost half (49.5%) of renters in this cluster spend more than 30 percent of their income on housing. The affordability threshold of approximately 30% of monthly income spent on rent, along with local poverty rates and the level of rent itself, explain why so many parts of the country can face a homelessness crisis, even though the annual HUD Counts have shown that nationally, homelessness has fallen. In this cluster, rent is 29% higher on average than the rest of the country, and the average homelessness rate is much higher than in any other cluster. The Communities of Care in this cluster represent 15.1% of the total US population, which contains 47.3% of the nation’s homeless population. A HUD report of the Seattle-

Bellevue-Everett area in March, 2019 stated that the majority of renter households with incomes less than 50% of the AMI were spending half or more of their incomes toward rent. (10)

Another blow to Seattle's ownership of homelessness mitigation took place in the form of increasingly disorganized funding for homeless providers. In 2017, instead of issuing funds to individual providers as had been the process for decades, the City began funding by "portfolio", with providers being required to apply competitively to fill spaces within that portfolio. One specific requirement posed a major difficulty: all programs must demonstrate that 40% of their clients progressed into housing or their programs could lose some or all funding the following year. Some shelters, day centers, and hygiene centers could not meet that requirement because of the diverse nature of their work, forcing the City Council to rescue those programs with alternate funding. The City has realized that this strategy is not very reasonable, because providers cannot afford to hire extra staff to work on housing referrals, nor can they refer clients to housing that doesn't exist.

Some claim that there are plenty of shelters open. Why do people stay in tents on the street instead of going into a shelter?

In fact, there aren't enough shelter beds available for those who need them. On any given night, estimates are that there are on average only 15-25 shelter beds available, as reported by the Navigation Team, comprised of City employees (the majority of whom are police officers) mandated to do outreach and cleanup of unsanctioned encampments. According to the 9th Circuit decision in *Martin v. City of Boise*, they cannot close such an encampment if there isn't enough alternative shelter, but the recent practice of "sweeping" such encampments if they are deemed dangerous or obstructive without the usual 72-hour notice means that often encampment residents do not have contact with the Navigation Team.

Additionally, some residents of those encampments and other people experiencing homelessness can't be accommodated in indoor shelters. Most shelters are mat-on-the-floor spaces rather than "enhanced" shelters, the latter of which most prefer. The few enhanced shelters open allow companion animals, partners, the storing of personal belongings, the ability to keep a space from night to night, and are 24/7, while the more basic shelters offer none of those advantages. In addition, they require people to line up at a certain time at night and leave at a

certain time in the morning, which does not suit night-time workers. They can be noisy and crowded, which is difficult for those with mental illness, and potential stayers often fear bedbugs or contagion. And those basic shelters often are not accessible to individuals who are incontinent or have medical problems which require insulin or oxygen, or who have physical disabilities which make it impossible to them to use beds placed on the floor.

There are also people who live in their vehicles, which they consider their last remaining home. In 2019, 2,147 people living in vehicles were counted in King County, with 1,245 in Seattle alone. However, historically, neither Seattle nor other municipalities in the region have provided any support for vehicle residents. Currently, Seattle has no plan for RV residents, and plans for persons living in other vehicles are minimal, amounting to reliance upon religious congregations for spots on their lots. Although there was funding for an expanded congregational-lot program in the 2018-2019 budget and part of that funding will carry over to 2020, there are still only a few spots in the one Ballard church lot which has operated its own private program for some years. All lived-in vehicles must move every 72-hours, and all are subject to parking and licensing ordinances that result in fines that can accumulate alarmingly if not paid. Since most people who resort to living in a vehicle are low income, these fines can become impossible to pay off. Additionally it is difficult to find parking for vehicles more than 80” in width as they are restricted to parking overnight only in areas zoned semi-industrial. Available parking spaces for all lived-in vehicles have been further limited by the proliferation of “No Parking 2-5AM” signs on city streets. It is obvious that the primary purpose for such signs is to prohibit vehicle residents from parking on those streets. They cannot simply find places in indoor shelters because their unattended vehicles may be vandalized, or considered abandoned and automatically impounded to tow yards, where the cost to redeem a vehicle is financially out of reach for their owners. Many vehicle residents also depend upon their vehicles for work, so the loss of the vehicle means both loss of shelter and loss of any income.

In summary, as with sweeps of unsanctioned encampments, towing of vehicles being used as homes is expensive and helps no one – it simply forces more people onto the street. The remedy of creating a relatively small number of city-funded safe lots should be put in place, so that vehicle residents would have a dependable “home place” while they rebuild their lives. It is imperative that Seattle lead the way within the new Regional Homelessness Authority toward an inclusive vehicle residency policy and protocol.

What status does government have in ending homelessness? Why not let charities and the religious community do it?

Government policy affects homelessness more than any other factor. All of the following elements are policy matters that affect homelessness in reality: building more low-income housing, raising the minimum wage, increasing the number of affordable day-care centers for low-income children, establishing job training programs, providing enough municipal emergency shelters, and allowing religious communities to provide what they can without restrictive regulations.

Ending homelessness is a policy issue that is limited due to funding priorities. Religious organizations are doing a major portion of helping people experiencing homelessness, but financial restrictions and governmental regulations constrict what they can do. Charity is not dependable in the long-term because charitable institutions and individuals can (and do) change their priorities and withdraw their funding over time. Most importantly, homelessness is a *societal problem*. It is important that all government entities – cities, counties, states, and the federal government – recognize that secure funding of housing and services will be necessary in order to mitigate homelessness. While local and state resources are increasingly stepping up as federal funding continues to be strained, it remains a question as to whether their actions and resources will be enough to meet the need, and if not, whether the federal government will reconsider its commitment to address the pervasive and growing problem of housing affordability for literally millions of US households. (11)

During the past few years, meetings have been held between County and Seattle officials and those from other municipalities to discuss forming a regional authority to address homelessness. In September 2019, new legislation, crafted by County Executive Constantine and Seattle Mayor Durkan, was forwarded to the King County Council and Seattle City Council establishing the King County Regional Homelessness Authority to oversee policy, funding, and services for people experiencing homelessness countywide. The legislation includes a proposed Interlocal Agreement (ILA) and a Charter that authorizes the creation of the new Public

Development Authority (PDA) to administer and oversee regional homelessness efforts. Both Councils have now passed an amended version the legislation establishing authority for various sectors of the plan. The amended version radically changed who will be responsible for approving and carrying out the plan: where before professionals and providers were given the most important say-so, the version passed by the Councils in December 2019 established, instead, that elected officials will be pre-eminent. That change, as well as the fact that smaller municipalities in the County will not be contributing any funding. However, the legislation signals a newly-realistic effort to act on homelessness as a truly regional problem, rather than each separate community addressing it. (12)

Is it true that some homeless people choose their lifestyle?

Homeless life is not a comfortable one. Few would choose a lifestyle that can be quite unhealthy, is at times dangerous, stressful, and humiliating, and invites abuse from many members of the community. Some homeless people choose to sleep on the streets rather than in traditional shelters because they are unsettled by shelter conditions and noise, but very few would choose the streets, or a vehicle which is safer than the streets but must be moved constantly, over a residence they could call home. Certainly, children do not choose homelessness, nor do victims of domestic violence. Interpersonal violence is a leading cause of homelessness for women and children, and the need for safe and affordable housing is one of the most pressing concerns for survivors of violence and abuse. (13)

Why don't families take care of their homeless relative?

Families of homeless individuals may themselves be destitute and unable to provide assistance to their relatives, no matter how they would wish to. If the homeless relative is mentally ill or in the grip of an addiction, families often cannot provide appropriate housing without possibly

jeopardizing the welfare of other family members. Many youth and young adults, especially those who are LGBTQ, may have been evicted by their families, or their homes may be too dangerous for their safety. Some homeless youth--from early teen years up to 18--leave their homes after years of physical or sexual abuse, strained relationships, the addiction of a family member, or parental neglect. If they are accepted into foster care, at age 18 they are "aged out" (unless they are still enrolled in school, in which case Washington youth may remain in housing). Some fall into sex work or drug-selling for survival. Youth are heavily influenced by peers and this can exacerbate refusal of services. Given their range of crises, youth have unique housing needs and demand significantly more attention than is currently available.

It is important to note that adult homeless people are autonomous beings. Leading them back toward being responsible and functioning neighbors who can manage their own lives ought to remain a higher priority than expecting their families to house them.

Shouldn't mentally ill persons be cared for in the community instead of becoming homeless?

The number of mentally ill needing services has far outstripped the services available in the community. In the 1960s about two million mentally-ill persons nationally were de-institutionalized in the belief they'd receive more humane therapeutic care outside institutions, but communities were not ready for this influx. Mentally-ill persons were discharged to nursing homes, SRO rooms, cheap hotels, boarding houses, and low-income housing units, often without necessary services. By the end of the 1980s, many mentally ill became the vanguard of our current homelessness crisis. Since that time, SROs no longer exist, most cheap hotels have been torn down for new development, and community mental health centers have inadequate funding and generally cannot provide housing for psychiatric patients. Often, due to the lack of adequate medication and consequent behavioral problems, mentally-ill homeless persons cycle between jail, temporary involuntary commitment in community hospitals, and the streets, which are all very expensive for society as well as extremely

unhealthy for homeless persons. These homeless neighbors need supportive housing so that they can take advantage of whatever treatment is available, as it is nearly impossible to deal with appointments, medications, and other treatment necessities with no stable home.

Mental health treatment is very costly. According to recent research reported by the Seattle Times' Project Homeless, a stay at a mental-health evaluation and treatment facility in King County costs almost a thousand dollars a day. After 14 days, if that person still needs intensive treatment, they are supposed to be transferred for longer-term care at Western State Hospital (if there is room). A year of outpatient office visits costs \$3,840; if someone is struggling with very serious mental illness, it might require a 14-day stay at a county evaluation and treatment facility, which is \$13,300. Some who have more serious mental illness will need both; for them, the cost for a year of treatment could be \$17,140. Neither Seattle nor King County has prioritized such treatment. (14)

Shouldn't homeless people who have substance addictions get off drugs and alcohol before they are given housing or services?

Many homeless people are dually-diagnosed, meaning they suffer from both addictions and mental illness, making it more difficult for them to cope with their addictions. If they have become homeless due to factors other than addiction, they may turn to alcohol or drugs to ease the pain of their lives, just as the housed do. As demonstrated by the current heroin/fentanyl epidemic and attested to by physicians, it is extremely difficult to conquer addictions, even when given medical assistance. Because homeless people usually must live their lives in public, they cannot hide their addictions, as the housed can, and the consequent humiliation may cause more self-medicating. Street outreach is underfunded and understaffed; help remains insufficient. Without necessary supports, these people likely will remain homeless. Since the harm-reduction housing called 1811 Eastlake was opened in the early 2000s, data have found that when residents are not expected to stop drinking before they are housed, the housing itself stabilizes them so that they gradually drink less, and their medical and emotional condition tends to improve. Those data have been recognized by organizations around the nation; however, in Seattle/King County, no other such housing has been added. (15)

Is it true that homeless people don't really want help?

The experience of being homeless can create fear of strangers, even those offering help. Some homeless people suffer from paranoid disorders. Others--especially homeless youth-- may have been severely abused in the past and don't trust adults. In particular, domestic violence victims experience difficulty in trusting. Some people have experienced involuntary hospitalizations with physical restraints or adverse side effects from medications and are fearful of repeating those experiences. For the majority who do seek help, many are often turned away from shelters for lack of space or cannot qualify for medical or financial help. If trust can be established and the help offered meets their needs, most people actively want to leave homelessness behind. In community discussions regarding what homeless people themselves identify as their priorities, two top needs are cited: 1) housing, and 2) a more empathetic attitude by providers, officials, and the general public.

Don't services such as emergency shelters, encampments, and housing for formerly-homeless individuals attract additional homeless people and increase crime in neighborhoods?

All of us, housed and homeless alike, belong to the same community. We can all agree that people live safer lives when housed or in shelter than when on the streets, and while there they may be helped to regain housing through employment or medical treatment. As tent encampments and tiny house villages have cycled around Seattle and King County over several decades, police officers have often attested that crime has not increased in those neighborhoods. (16) In fact, in some cases crime has dropped, since those encampments make a practice of safety patrolling the neighborhood for several blocks around. As far as housing for formerly homeless people attracting crime, there's no more reason that it would than would any other housing.

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