

Homelessness Discussed

Why is this happening to so many people these days?

Have you rented an apartment or home in the last few years? Noticed the increase in cost? Had coworkers, friends or family members impacted by the growing expense? The rental market is tight and people looking for housing have a tough time finding units. Over 100,000 people moved to Washington last year: from 2018 to 2019, net migration (people moving in minus people moving out) totaled 90,100; up by 3,300 the previous year. It's no surprise that counties across the state have some of the lowest vacancy rates in the nation.

The thing is - there is a direct correlation between rental increases and homelessness.

Homelessness has been increasing in Washington since 2013. There just aren't enough affordable units for people with the lowest incomes. When rents go up, people with low incomes or living on fixed incomes (elderly and disabled) are pushed out of units that were once reasonable. You can learn more about how much you need to earn to afford a modest apartment [here](#) and watch a video on why homelessness is increasing [here](#).

Comment: It feels like homeless people don't want housing and choose that lifestyle.

When you see people sitting on sidewalks or wandering around, it may seem like that, but the overwhelming majority of survey responses include answers that people want housing, and experiencing homelessness is traumatic and stressful.

Can you imagine living in your car, sleeping outside, and not having access to bathroom facilities?

The National Health Care for the Homeless Council points out life expectancy for someone who is homeless can be 20-30 years younger than the general population. The [National Coalition for the Homeless](#) has estimated annually there are 13,000 people who are homeless that die outside each year.

People often need to move their families and belongings multiple times to avoid violence and harassment. Shelters and homeless housing programs may have stringent eligibility criteria and rules that screen out the most vulnerable people. There is not enough housing assistance available for those who need it. Being homeless is really hard. People experiencing homelessness talk about survival as all-encompassing and judging choices or behavior when someone is simply trying to survive isn't helpful.

Comment: Most people who are homeless are violent or dangerous.

A person who is homeless is not more likely to be a criminal than a housed person, with one legal exception: violation of camping ordinances.

Homelessness can be illegal.

Can you imagine? You've lost your apartment, maybe even your car. You've pared down your "stuff" again and again to what you can carry or haul around. And existing outside, sleeping on a park bench, a sidewalk or in a tent is illegal. Shelters are full (or feel unsafe). Where are you supposed to go?

People who are homeless break the law merely by being homeless. A person who is homeless is less likely to perpetrate a violent crime than a housed person. In fact, they are more likely to be the victim of a violent crime, especially if they are a homeless woman, teen or child. (Source: <http://bit.ly/29ujT0J>)

Question: Does providing housing services attract more homeless people from other areas?

Most people who are experiencing homelessness are living in the same city where they became homeless.

All people move. For jobs, for relationships, to be closer to or farther away from families.

According to data collected during the 2018 Point in Time Count, 74% of people experiencing homelessness in rural Washington are homeless in the county that they were last permanently housed. This is consistent with data from previous years. When they do relocate, people experiencing homelessness often end up in a new city for the same reasons many of us do; for example, a job or to be closer to friends and family.

While some people experiencing homelessness move to find jobs and housing, many are unable to move because of physical or behavioral health disabilities, financial hardships (like foreclosure or job loss that may have led to homelessness), or simply not wanting to leave a community where they have established meaningful roots.

Comment: Most homeless youth are runaways who don't want to listen to their parent's rules.

Family conflict is a major driver of youth homelessness often because of family dysfunction, rejection, abuse, or neglect.

Nationally, 90 percent of youth accessing shelters claim they experienced conflict at home ([HHS, 2013](#)).

When young people become homeless due to family conflict it is often because the home is no longer a safe place to be. Nationally 20-40% of all homeless youth are LGBTQ, largely because of family rejection.

Additionally, a parent's drug or alcohol abuse, mental health issues, or domestic violence may contribute to family conflict, leading young people to flee the home or try to fend for themselves.

Comment: Most people are homeless because they made bad choices or are lazy.

Homelessness is usually the result of many factors, including social and economic inequality, and system failures.

It's not about lack of ambition or desire for a safe and permanent place to live.

People who are experiencing homelessness are often focused on staying safe and warm. Additionally, many people face the trauma of homelessness with disabling conditions and serious health conditions, including severe mental illness.

We know that anyone can become homeless if they lack housing and other critical resources and supports, but certain groups are overrepresented among those experiencing homelessness. These groups include minoritized populations, such as people of color and the LGBTQ+ community, who experience historical and institutional discrimination.

Question: Shouldn't homeless people be required to remain clean and sober to receive services?

Housing solves homelessness. Housing, without preconditions, is an evidenced based practice to ending homelessness for a person.

Many people who have never experienced homelessness overuse drugs and/or drink alcohol in the privacy of their own homes. Should they be required to be clean and sober too? Everyone deserves housing.

Polling indicates three-quarters of Americans believe adequate housing is a human right, and two-thirds believe government programs need to be expanded to ensure this right. In fact, in Franklin Roosevelt's 1944 State of the Union address, he declared the United States had a "Second Bill of Rights," including the right to a decent home. In 1948, the United States signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), recognizing adequate housing as a component of the human right to an adequate standard of living.

Research indicates people experiencing homelessness access housing faster and are more likely to maintain stable housing when a Housing First approach is implemented. Further, support services have been found to be more effective when engagement is optional.

Housing First does not require engagement in support services, such as substance abuse treatment, as a precondition to housing. Instead, Housing First prioritizes safety and access to permanent housing. Many people living outside are vulnerable to violence, illness and death. The Housing First service model is grounded in the idea that having basic needs met, like a safe place to live, is a critical foundation for addressing all other needs.

Question: Can't homeless youth go into foster care if their families are not taking care of them?

The majority of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness do not meet CPS's thresholds for foster care placement.

Child welfare has limited resources for addressing the needs of unaccompanied homeless youth.

The child welfare system exists to protect children from abuse and neglect, often having to prioritize younger children with their limited resources. Unaccompanied youth who are couch surfing or staying in shelters typically do not meet the threshold for neglect because their basic needs (food, shelter, water, and clothing) are being met. The new Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) is working to serve older youth by creating a new adolescents services division to address the needs of youth in the home before they run away.

Comment: Most people experience homelessness because they use drugs or alcohol.

Research shows that substance abuse or other co-occurring disorders are both a cause and a result of homelessness.

Treatment resources are limited and those experiencing homelessness face even more challenges when engaging in these services.

Roughly 32% of individuals experiencing homelessness suffer from addiction to drugs and alcohol—a figure approximately 20% higher than reported abuse of alcohol and illicit drugs by the general population. Homelessness, which is usually accompanied by loss of income, isolation and loss of self-worth, can increase the risk of substance use. It is often mistakenly assumed that alcoholics and drug users lack moral principles or willpower and they could stop using drugs simply by choosing to change their behavior. Recovering from addiction is difficult for housed people; it is even more difficult for people experiencing the additional trauma of homelessness. (Sources: <http://bit.ly/29g5VP2> ; <http://bit.ly/29uiKq0> ; <http://bit.ly/29m10t9>)

For people who are mentally ill, the options are not much better. Despite significant investments in recent years to improve mental-health services and capacity, the system continues to struggle with a lack of beds and a shortage of mental-health workers. Long waiting lists for mental hospitals, paired with the lack of community services for people discharged from those hospitals, are named as prime factors behind the growing number of mentally ill people living on the street — they represent roughly 35% of King County's homeless population by some estimates. By one count, almost a quarter of Washingtonians have a mental health disorder, more than nearly any other state. But when it comes to treating them, Washington is among the worst in the nation.

Question: What about sex offenders? It doesn't seem safe for them to be in shelters.

The roughly 82,000 sex offenders across the US are more carefully tracked and controlled than any other type of former criminal.

Reporting requirements for registered sex offenders with no fixed address are particularly stringent compared to most housed offenders.

Sex offenders are required to live under terms of release as determined by a court, must report to the local Sheriff weekly about where they are staying, and are under threat of more stringent reclassification or re-confinement if they break these terms.

Access to a shelter provides offenders with a registered address and is a positive factor associated with meeting the requirements of their release. On the other hand, banning them from shelter forces them into the more stressful life on the streets which is associated with a greater likelihood of recidivism. The largest study to date commissioned by the U.S. Department of Justice found that sex offenders have a lower rate of recidivism (7.7%) than that of many other categories of crime. (Source: <https://bit.ly/2u6IHYc>)