

Why Are Some People Homeless

Homelessness in the United States

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In the United States, the number of homeless people on a given night in January 2024 was more than 770,000 according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development. Homelessness has increased in recent years, in large part due to an increasingly severe housing shortage and rising home prices in the United States. Most homeless people lived in California, New York, Florida, and Washington in 2022, according to the annual Homeless Assessment Report. The majority of homeless people in the United States have been homeless for less than one year; two surveys by YouGov in 2022 and 2023 found that just under 20 percent of Americans reported having ever been homeless.

The main contributor to homelessness is a lack of housing supply and rising home values. Interpersonal and individual factors, such as mental illness and addiction, also play a role in explaining homelessness. However, mental illness and addiction play a weaker role than structural socio-economic factors, as West Coast cities such as Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles have homelessness rates five times that of areas with much lower housing costs like Arkansas, West Virginia, and Detroit, even though the latter locations have high burdens of opioid addiction and poverty.

Historically, homelessness emerged as a national issue in the 1870s. Early homeless people lived in emerging urban cities, such as New York City. Into the 20th century, the Great Depression of the 1930s caused a substantial rise in homelessness. In 1990, the U.S. Census Bureau estimated the homeless population to be of 228,621, or 0.09% of the 248,709,873 enumerated in the 1990 U.S. census, which homelessness advocates criticized as an undercount. In the 21st century, the Great Recession of the late 2000s and the resulting economic stagnation and downturn have been major driving factors and contributors to rising homelessness rates. Increases in homelessness broke records in 2022 and in 2023. In 2023, record levels of homelessness have been declared in Los Angeles and New York City, and other cities around the country have reported increased levels of homelessness, with the main drivers being a shortage of affordable housing and the increased cost of living. In 2024, homelessness increased by a record 18%.

Health complications are significant concern for homeless people, as lack of residence inhibits hygiene and access to healthy food, and exposes individuals to both cold and heat stress, violence, and traffic deaths. This contributes to increased mortality rates. In *City of Grants Pass v. Johnson* (2024), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that anti-camping laws do not constitute a cruel and unusual punishment under the 8th Amendment even when no shelter is available, allowing cities to jail and fine homeless populations for sleeping and camping outside.

Homelessness

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Homelessness, also known as houselessness or being unhoused or unsheltered, is the condition of lacking stable, safe, and functional housing. It includes living on the streets, moving between temporary accommodation with family or friends, living in boarding houses with no security of tenure, and people who leave their homes because of civil conflict and are refugees within their country.

The legal status of homeless people varies from place to place. Homeless enumeration studies conducted by the government of the United States also include people who sleep in a public or private place that is not designed for use as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings. Homelessness and poverty are interrelated. There is no standardized method for counting homeless individuals and identifying their needs; consequently, most cities only have estimated figures for their homeless populations.

In 2025, approximately 330 million people worldwide experience absolute homelessness, lacking any form of shelter. Homeless persons who travel have been termed vagrants in the past; of those, persons looking for work are hobos, whereas those who do not are tramps. All three of these terms, however, generally have a derogatory connotation today.

Homelessness in California

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In January 2024 at least 187,084 people were experiencing homelessness in California, according to the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. This is 0.48% of California's population, one of the highest per capita rates in the nation.

California has the highest percentage of unsheltered homeless people among all U.S. states, with two-thirds of its homeless population sleeping on the streets, in encampments, or in their cars. Nearly one in four homeless people in the U.S., and 45% of unsheltered homeless people, live in California. Even those who are sheltered are so insecurely: 90% of homeless adults in California spent at least one night without shelter in a six-month period.

A statewide housing shortage drives the homelessness crisis. A 2022 study found that differences in per capita homelessness rates across the United States are not due to differing rates of mental illness, drug addiction, or poverty, but to differences in the cost of housing. West Coast cities including San Francisco, Los Angeles, and San Diego have homelessness rates five times as high as areas with much lower housing costs like Arkansas, West Virginia, and Detroit, even though the latter locations have high burdens of opioid addiction and poverty. California has the second lowest number of housing units per capita, and an estimated shortage of one million homes that are affordable to the lowest income renters. Another 2022 study found that moderate decreases in rents would significantly reduce homelessness. A 2023 study published by the University of California, San Francisco also found that the high cost of housing was the greatest obstacle to reducing homelessness.

From 2007 to 2023, California's homeless population grew more than any other state's. While the national homeless population decreased by 18% between 2010 and 2020, California's increased by 31%. This trend continued from 2020 to 2022, when California's homeless population grew by 6% while the rest of the country saw an increase of less than 0.5%. A 2021 survey revealed that 19% of Californians reported that they or someone close to them had experienced homelessness in the previous five years.

36% of homeless people in California are categorized as "chronically homeless"—which means "they have a long-standing disability that significantly impedes their ability to live independently and have been unhoused for a consecutive year or on at least four occasions within a three-year period." The remaining 64% are categorized as "experiencing short-term homelessness" though many may have been homeless for similar durations without meeting the disability criterion for chronic homelessness.

80% of homeless people in California are adults not with children; 40% of those are aged 50 and older. 14% are families with children. 7% are unaccompanied young people (defined as being under age 25).

Homelessness in the United States by state

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Homelessness in the United States has differing rates of prevalence by state. The total number of homeless people in the United States fluctuates and constantly changes, hence a comprehensive figure encompassing the entire nation is not issued, since counts from independent shelter providers and statistics managed by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development vary greatly. Federal HUD counts hover annually at around 500,000 people. Point-in-time counts are also vague measures of homeless populations and are not a precise and definitive indicator for the total number of cases, which may differ in both directions up or down. The most recent figure for 2019, was 567,715 individuals nationally that experienced homelessness at a point in time during this period.

Homeless people may use shelters, or may sleep in cars, tents, on couches, or in other public places. Separate counts of sheltered people and unsheltered people are critical in understanding the homeless population. Each state has different laws, social services and medical policies, and other conditions which influence the number of homeless persons, and what services are available to homeless people in each state.

A 2022 study found that differences in per capita homelessness rates across the country are not due to mental illness, drug addiction, or poverty, but to differences in the cost of housing due largely to housing shortages, with West Coast cities including Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles having homelessness rates five times that of areas with much lower housing costs, like Arkansas, West Virginia, and Detroit, even though the latter locations have high burdens of opioid addiction and poverty.

The state by state counts of people listed below are derived from under-reported federal HUD statistics.

In June 2024, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a ruling which permitted cities to ban homeless camps, thus making it possible to jail people for sleeping in areas such as public parks.

Homeless Jesus

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Homeless Jesus, also known as Jesus the Homeless (French: Jésus le sans-abri), is a bronze sculpture by Timothy Schmalz depicting Jesus as a homeless person, sleeping on a park bench. The original sculpture was installed in 2013 at Regis College, a theological college federated with the University of Toronto. Other copies of the statue were installed in several other locations beginning in 2014. As of 2017, over 50 copies were created and placed around the world.

Anti-homelessness legislation

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Anti-homelessness legislation can take two forms: legislation that aims to help and re-house homeless people; and legislation that is intended to send homeless people to homeless shelters compulsorily, or to criminalize homelessness and begging.

Homelessness in the San Francisco Bay Area

opened to benefit the homeless community. Despite Agnos's official support for homeless people, his administration was not without some controversy. A group

The San Francisco Bay Area comprises nine northern California counties and contains five of the ten most expensive counties in the United States. Strong economic growth has created hundreds of thousands of new jobs, but coupled with severe restrictions on building new housing units, it has resulted in a statewide housing shortage which has driven rents to extremely high levels. The Sacramento Bee notes that large cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles both attribute their recent increases in homeless people to the housing shortage, with the result that homelessness in California overall has increased by 15% from 2015 to 2017. In September 2019, the Council of Economic Advisers released a report in which they stated that deregulation of the housing markets would reduce homelessness in some of the most constrained markets by estimates of 54% in San Francisco, 40 percent in Los Angeles, and 38 percent in San Diego, because rents would fall by 55 percent, 41 percent, and 39 percent respectively. In San Francisco, a minimum wage worker would have to work approximately 4.7 full-time jobs to be able to spend less than 30% of their income on renting a two-bedroom apartment.

San Francisco has several thousand homeless people, despite extensive efforts by the city government to address the issue. San Francisco's dense, compact development pattern, its comparative lack of vacant land (i.e., beneath freeways, alongside creeks), and its high volumes of pedestrians tend to limit homeless encampments to the city's sidewalks and are thus more readily visible to the general public. This dramatically larger prevalence of visible homelessness in the city, relative to other large US cities, is widely noted by visitors and residents. As of 2018, this had begun to impact the city's largest industry, tourism (a \$9 billion industry), as one large doctors' group has decided to move their annual convention elsewhere after members' concerns about threatening behavior, mental illness, and assault on one of their board members.

The number of people in poverty in the San Francisco Bay Area grew from 573,333 (8.6%) in 2000 to 668,876 (9.7%) in 2006–2010. While poverty rates vary greatly across the SF Bay area, in 2015, the Silicon Valley Institute for Regional Studies published that the poverty rate was 11.3%, having a slight downward trend from 12%; however, it was still above the historical average rate of 9%.

Homelessness in Canada

the hidden homeless category. This includes 6,000 youth nightly and 30,000 youth annually. The percentage of Indigenous people who are homeless is more than

Homelessness in Canada was not a social problem until the 1980s. The Canadian government housing policies and programs in place throughout the 1970s were based on a concept of shelter as a basic need or requirement for survival and of the obligation of government and society to provide adequate housing for everyone. Public policies shifted away from rehousing in the 1980s in wealthy Western countries like Canada, which led to a de-housing of households that had previously been housed. By 1987, when the United Nations established the International Year of Shelter for the Homeless (IYSH), homelessness had become a serious social problem in Canada. The report of the major 1987 IYSH conference held in Ottawa said that housing was not a high priority for government, and this was a significant contributor to the homelessness problem. While there was a demand for adequate and affordable housing for low income Canadian families, government funding was not available. In the 1980s a "wider segment of the population" began to experience homelessness for the first time – evident through their use of emergency shelters and soup kitchens. Shelters began to experience overcrowding, and demand for services for the homeless was constantly increasing. A series of cuts were made to national housing programs by the federal government through the mid-1980s and in the 1990s. While Canada's economy was robust, the cuts continued and in some cases accelerated in the 1990s, including cuts to the 1973 national affordable housing program. The government solution for homelessness was to create more homeless shelters and to increase emergency services. In the larger metropolitan areas like Toronto the use of homeless shelters increased by 75% from 1988 to 1998. Urban centres such as Montreal, Laval, Vancouver, Edmonton, and Calgary all experienced increasing homelessness.

In Action Plan 2011, the Federal Government of Canada proposed \$120 million annually from April 2014 until April 2019—with \$70 million in new funding—to renew its Homelessness Partnering Strategy (HPS) with a focus on the Housing First model. Private or public organizations across Canada were eligible for HPS subsidies to implement Housing First programs.

Homelessness in the United Kingdom

Unsheltered people, "rough sleepers", are a small minority of homeless people. Homeless charity Shelter estimated in 2024 that the number of people in England

Homelessness in the United Kingdom is measured and responded to in differing ways in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, but affects people living each of the countries of the United Kingdom. Most homeless people have at least a modicum of shelter but without any security of tenure. Unsheltered people, "rough sleepers", are a small minority of homeless people.

Homelessness in Seattle

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In the Seattle King County area, there were estimated to be 11,751 homeless people living on the streets or in shelters. On January 24, 2020, the count of unsheltered homeless individuals was 5,578. The number of individuals without homes in emergency shelters was 4,085 and the number of homeless individuals in transitional housing was 2,088, for a total count of 11,751 unsheltered people.

The percentages of individuals experiencing homelessness by race was: White 48%, African American 25%, Asian 2%, Native American 15%, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander 4%, Multi-racial 6%. In a survey conducted in 2019, 84% of homeless people in Seattle/King County lived in Seattle/King County prior to losing their housing, 11% lived in another county in Washington prior to losing their housing, and 5% lived out of state prior to losing their housing. Homelessness in Seattle is considered to be a crisis. It has been proposed that to address the crisis Seattle needs more permanent supportive housing.

A 2022 study found that differences in per capita homelessness rates across the country are not due to mental illness, drug addiction, or poverty, but to differences in the cost of housing, with West Coast cities like Seattle having homelessness rates five times that of areas with much lower housing costs like Arkansas, West Virginia, Detroit, and Chicago even though the latter locations have high burdens of opioid addiction and poverty.

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