

# 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).

## 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 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.

Homelessness in the United Kingdom

*Unsheltered people, &quot;rough sleepers&quot;, 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 in 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 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 England

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In England, local authorities have duties to homeless people under Part VII of the Housing Act 1996 as amended by the Homelessness Act 2002. There are five hurdles which a homeless person must overcome in order to qualify as statutory homeless. If an applicant only meets the first three of these tests Councils still have a duty to provide interim accommodation. However an applicant must satisfy all five for a Council to have to give an applicant "reasonable preference" on the social housing register. Even if a person passes these five tests councils have the ability to use the private rented sector to end their duty to a homeless person.

The five tests are:

Is the applicant homeless or threatened with homelessness?

Is the applicant eligible for assistance?

Is the applicant priority need?

Is the applicant intentionally homeless?

Does the applicant have a local connection?

The yearly number of homeless households in England peaked in 2003–04 at 135,420 before falling to a low of 40,020 in 2009–10. In 2014–15, there were 54,430 homeless households, which was 60 per cent below the 2003–04 peak. However, in December 2016 the housing charity Shelter estimated homelessness in England to amount to more than 250,000 people; Shelter calculated the figure using four sets of official sources: statistics on rough sleepers (i.e. people sleeping on the streets), statistics on those in temporary accommodation, the number of people housed in hostels and the number of people waiting to be housed by council social services departments.

In England, it had been estimated in 2007 an average of 498 people slept rough each night, with 248 of those in London. But reportedly numbers sleeping rough have soared in recent years and doubled since 2010; figures reported for the 2015 count were 3,569 people rough sleeping in England on a single night, up 102% from 2010.

Given the costs of providing temporary accommodation and the limited amount of social housing in the United Kingdom some Councils have been criticised for attempting to circumvent their duties under the law, a process which has been termed "gatekeeping". The term "Non-statutory homelessness" covers people who are considered by the local authority to be not eligible for assistance, not in priority need or "intentionally homeless".

Households in temporary accommodation rose from 35,850 in 2011 to 54,280 in early 2017. Part of the cause is people losing private tenancies, which Shelter maintains increased drastically since 2011 when housing benefit cuts began. Almost three quarters of homeless people are single parent families. Just under 30,000 single parent families became homeless in 2017, this rose 8% from five years previously. Their limited income makes it hard for them to deal with rising living costs, high rents and benefit cuts. The number of households in temporary accommodation has risen by almost two thirds since 2010 and reached 78,930. Mothers of single parent families are particularly at risk of homelessness. According to Shelter one in 55 single parent families became homeless in 2017 to 2018 and 92% of the 26,610 cases were headed by a mother. In 2023, the number of homeless people in England hit record levels, with 104,510 people in England in temporary accommodation. An estimated 3,898 people slept rough in England in 2023, over double the estimated figure from 2010.

## Homelessness in Seattle

*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*

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.

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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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