

## Frequently Asked Questions About Homelessness

### Do people become homeless because they made bad choices?

- The [top five causes](#) of homelessness are: 1) lack of affordable housing, 2) lack of a living wage, 3) domestic violence, 4) medical bankruptcy, and 5) untreated mental illness. These causes can happen to anyone.
- [Trauma](#) can also play a large role. When coping with mental illness or addiction, maintaining independent housing may not be feasible.
- Lawyers, doctors, film directors, entrepreneurs, university professors, professional musicians and many others have experienced homelessness. Anyone can become homeless if they have no way to pay for housing and no other resources or support. To learn more, go to <http://invisiblepeople.tv/blog/> for some interviews with homeless individuals and hear their stories.

### Are homeless people choosing to be homeless?

- In King County, [98% of homeless people](#) would accept affordable housing if it were offered to them.
- Many causes of homelessness have [nothing to do with choice](#).
- For example, many homeless women are survivors of domestic abuse. These women lack a support system and may be unable to seek resources. If they depend on their abuser for financial stability, it's difficult to find the money for a new home, especially when prevented from working by their abuser.
- [Veterans](#) also suffer homelessness disproportionately due to trauma, poverty, lack of support networks, and dismal living conditions in overcrowded or substandard housing.

### Don't we have enough shelter?

- No. Seattle [does not have sufficient or adequate shelter](#).
- Some people who are homeless sleep [outside rather than in shelters](#) because they don't do well in crowded environment or fear having to leave pets and belongings outside. In addition, many shelters and homeless housing programs have stringent eligibility criteria and rules that screen out the most vulnerable people. Finally, most shelters are a place to sleep for a few hours, not a place to live.

### **Doesn't Seattle already have enough money to solve homelessness?**

- No. The recent [McKinsey Report](#) revealed a 14,000-unit shortage of affordable housing. Because of the gap, and the rising numbers of people who are homeless, annual spending — public, private or both — needs to double to \$410 million if the problem is to be solved.
- Yet city funding for new housing projects, for which housing agencies compete through an annual process called a Notice of Funding Availability (NOFA), [is shrinking](#) this year from more than \$100 million to \$40 million, enough to fund only a handful of proposals submitted by housing providers this year.
- Seattle needs more money to combat homelessness, but also needs to shift its [spending priorities](#) for new resources away from emergency responses and toward housing.

### **Aren't many homeless people in our area from someplace else? And they just come here because we offer so many services?**

- No. [All Home's 2018 report on homelessness in King County](#) shows that the vast majority (93%) of our county's homeless population were Washington residents before they became homeless.
- 83% percent of respondents reported living in King County before they became homeless.
- The city of [Seattle's Homeless Needs Assessment](#) showed similar results: 49 percent of respondents reported they were living in the city of Seattle when they most recently became homeless; 31 percent report being originally from Seattle; of the 69 percent of respondents not originally from Seattle, 15 percent report living in Seattle for a decade or more.

### **Aren't a lot of homeless people criminals?**

- A person who is homeless is no more likely to be a criminal than a housed person, with [one legal exception](#): camping ordinances. People who are homeless break that law by being homeless.
- Criminal records for homeless single adults are overwhelmingly due to misdemeanor offenses related to living outdoors, such as [trespass](#).
- A person who is homeless is less likely to perpetrate a violent crime than a housed person and is [more likely to be the victim](#) of a violent crime, especially if they are a homeless woman, teen, or child.
- Remaining on the streets also puts homeless people at risk of [being victims](#) of violence, including murder, assault, rape, and theft.
- Homeless people are often the victims of [hate crimes](#).
- They are also 25 times more likely to be the victims of violent crimes. About half (49%) [have reported](#) being victims of violence compared with only 2% of the general

US population.

### **Are homeless people even trying?**

- People who are homeless often show great fortitude in just trying to survive.
- It's difficult to focus on anything when we're hungry. For homeless people, every day can be a new struggle to find food. This struggle means finding transportation and money to get to that food.
- Apart from the struggle to find nourishment, there is also the need to find a safe place to sleep at night where they're not exposed to the elements.
- Homeless people are often sleep-deprived, cold, wet, and sick. With no transportation and little money, they can spend all day getting to food and maybe an appointment before they must search for a safe place to sleep, all while trying to keep their personal possessions safe. Additionally, many people face the trauma of homelessness with disabling conditions such as chronic health conditions and severe mental illness.

### **Why don't homeless people just get jobs?**

- Many homeless people do work (some [reports](#) estimate 44% nationally) and live in their cars, emergency shelters, and even outside. But it is hard to get or maintain employment when you have no place to bathe or to prepare meals or electricity to set an alarm.
- Getting and keeping a job can be especially challenging. Applying for work can be difficult without a permanent address or regular access to a shower or transportation. Other obstacles such as mental illness can also be a barrier to seeking employment.
- Even having a job doesn't mean you can avoid homelessness. There is [no state](#) in the U.S. where a minimum wage worker working full time can afford a two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent. In Washington State, a resident must work 75 hours a week at minimum wage to afford the rent of a 1-bedroom apartment. Accordingly, the price of housing is [out of reach](#) for most of our neighbors.
- The definition of chronic homelessness includes the presence of a disability in addition to continuous of homelessness of at least a year. The federal disability program called SSI includes a monthly income of \$750, which is insufficient to cover the cost of an apartment in the Seattle area.
- Not having a job isn't always a choice either. Many homeless people who have committed nonviolent crimes have a difficult time being hired even when they spend the time applying for jobs and going to interviews. It's not a lack of effort that prevents them from finding work.

### **Why should we help chronically homeless people?**

- Homelessness is a crisis; chronic homelessness is its epicenter.
- Chronic homelessness is defined as sleeping in places not meant for human habitation or staying in emergency shelters for a year or longer—or experiencing at least four such episodes of homelessness in the last three years—and also living with a disabling condition such as a chronic health problem, psychiatric or emotional condition, or physical disability.
- Seattle/King County’s latest [Point in Time Count](#) in January 2018 revealed at least 3,552 individuals were experiencing chronic homelessness.
- This number is a 28% increase (779 more people) over last year.
- Chronically homeless people are the most visible and among the [most vulnerable](#).
- Exposed on the street, they suffer from higher rates of [poor health, mental illness, and substance abuse](#) when compared to homeless populations generally.
- They are the least likely to exit homelessness without intervention.
- They also generate [disproportionate costs](#) if left to live on the street, generating enormous costs in emergency services and hospitalization, as well as police, court, and probation resources, and jail time.
- It is less expensive to house chronically homeless people than to leave them homeless. Studies suggest a chronically homeless person left on the street can cost \$30,000-\$80,000 a year; by contrast, permanent supportive housing (PSH) costs an average of \$16,000-22,000 a year. As a result, PSH can lead to [substantial savings](#). Even among the heaviest service users, it may be a cost-neutral investment, with the cost of housing subsidies and services offset by reductions in other spending for public services.
- [Housing First](#) and [Permanent Supportive Housing](#) programs, which provide access to housing without requiring participants to use other services such as mental and physical health care, addiction treatment, education and employment options, across the nation have demonstrated success in ending homelessness for even the ‘hardest’ to reach.
- When people are housed, they can more easily and effectively work towards resolving issues such as alcoholism, drug addiction and mental illness.

### **But providing housing to homeless people is too expensive, isn't it?**

- Research consistently shows it costs more to keep people homeless than housed.
- The status quo costs more than sufficiently investing in permanent supportive housing.

### **Aren't most people homeless because of drugs and alcohol?**

- While drug and alcohol use is associated with homelessness to some extent, substance abuse disorder is often the result of homelessness, [not the cause](#).
- According to Seattle’s [2016 Homeless Needs Assessment](#), 45 percent of respondents said that they did not use any drugs.

- 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 [drive people](#) to substance use. Recovering from addiction is difficult for housed people; it is even more difficult for people experiencing the additional trauma of homelessness.
- Permanent supportive housing is the [best way](#) for homeless people with addiction problems to recover.
- Traditional approaches, which offer services or treatment—but not housing—are more costly and less effective than offering [permanent supportive housing](#).

### **Are homeless people gaming the system?**

- A relatively small percentage of homeless people receive government assistance. The largest part of government assistance includes either disability benefits in Supplemental Security Income, or SSI, or welfare benefits in Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, or TANF. What are [the facts](#)? Although over 40 percent of homeless persons are eligible for disability benefits, only 11 percent actually receive them. Most homeless families are eligible for welfare benefits but only 52 percent receive them.
- When individuals do receive benefits, they rarely receive enough to afford housing. [Since 2017](#), every state's TANF benefits for a family of three are at or far below the poverty line and were woefully inadequate to pay a Fair Market Rent.

### **It seems like nothing is working.**

- Approaches that address the underlying causes of homelessness actually do work.
- Permanent supportive housing has been proven to help chronically homeless people who wouldn't accept other interventions. People in permanent supportive housing programs stay out of homelessness and enjoy improved health and connectedness to the community.
- Many communities have [ended or made significant progress](#) on ending chronic homelessness through Housing First/permanent supportive housing approaches.
- In Seattle and elsewhere on the west coast, the rapid rise in homelessness since 2013 has overwhelmed existing systems and has generated crisis responses not capable of actually ending homelessness.
- A concerted effort focused on housing the people most likely to remain homeless is a crucial to our city's progress.