

THE HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES IN THE NEWS



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WASHINGTON DC



THE HOMELESSNESS CRISIS

CENTRAL QUESTION



How should governments work to address the homelessness crisis?

INTRODUCTION



On a single night in 2019, an estimated 567,715 people in the United States were homeless.¹ Some of these people were temporarily housed in emergency shelters; others were camping on the street, in parks, or in their cars. In this *Close Up in Class Controversial Issue in the News*, we will take a look at the nationwide homelessness crisis, examine several proposed policy solutions, and challenge you to weigh the pros and cons of various paths forward.

BACKGROUND



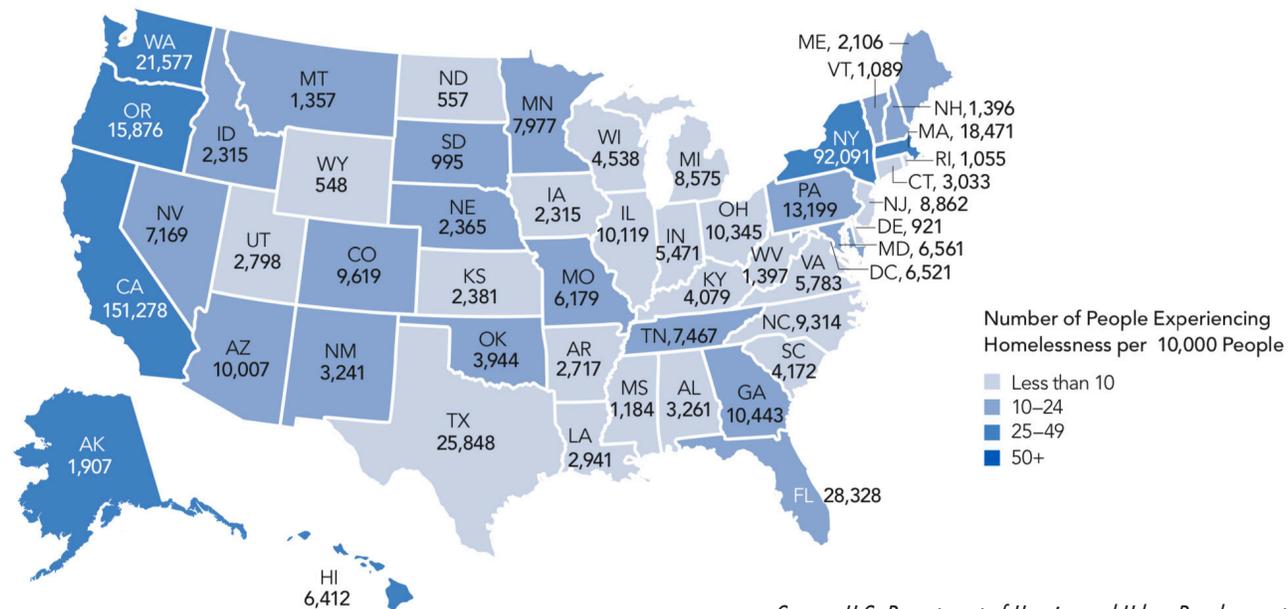
Who Is Homeless in the United States? In January 2020, the Department of Housing and Urban Development released its Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, which found that on a single night in 2019, 17 of every 10,000 Americans—567,715 people—were homeless. Sixty-three percent of those people were in sheltered locations (such as emergency shelters or transitional housing); 37 percent were in unsheltered locations (such as on the street or in abandoned buildings).²

The report also found the following:

- Between 2018 and 2019, nationwide homelessness increased by three percent, or 14,885 people.
- In this time period, homelessness declined in most (29) states and increased in fewer (21) states. However, in California alone, the homeless population spiked by 16 percent, or 21,306 people, thus accounting for the nationwide increase.
- Nearly half of all people experiencing homelessness in 2019 lived in three states: California (27 percent, or 151,278 people), New York (16 percent, or 92,091 people), and Florida (five percent, or 28,328 people).
- California had the highest percentage of its homeless population (72 percent) living in unsheltered locations in 2019, followed by Oregon (64 percent), Hawaii (57 percent), Nevada (53 percent), and Arkansas (52 percent).
- Sixty-one percent of people experiencing homelessness in 2019 were men or boys, 39 percent were women or girls, and less than one percent were transgender or gender non-conforming. Forty-eight percent were white, 40 percent were black, and 22 percent were Hispanic or Latino.³

Estimates of People Experiencing Homelessness

By State, 2019



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Why Are People Homeless in the United States? People become, and remain, homeless for a variety of reasons, according to organizations such as the nonprofit National Alliance to End Homelessness. These reasons include a lack of affordable housing and the limited scope of government housing initiatives (such as public housing programs and voucher programs that help low-income Americans pay for housing in the private market).⁴ Physical or mental health crises can lead to homelessness as well. In its annual report, the Department of Housing and Urban Development found that approximately 20 percent of the 2019 homeless population was severely mentally ill. Substance abuse is also a known risk factor for homelessness; the Department estimates that 16 percent of the 2019 homeless population suffered from chronic substance abuse. Furthermore, an estimated eight percent were victims of domestic violence who became homeless when fleeing an abusive relationship.⁵

States with the Highest and Lowest Percentages of People Experiencing Homelessness who were Unsheltered

2019

Highest Rates

CALIFORNIA

71.7%

151,278 Homeless
108,432 Unsheltered

OREGON

63.9%

15,876 Homeless
10,142 Unsheltered

HAWAII

56.8%

6,412 Homeless
3,640 Unsheltered

NEVADA

53.1%

7,169 Homeless
3,807 Unsheltered

ARKANSAS

52.1%

2,717 Homeless
1,415 Unsheltered

Lowest Rates

NORTH DAKOTA

2.2%

557 Homeless
12 Unsheltered

NEW YORK

4.4%

92,091 Homeless
4,047 Unsheltered

MASSACHUSETTS

4.5%

18,471 Homeless
829 Unsheltered

MAINE

4.5%

2,106 Homeless
95 Unsheltered

NEBRASKA

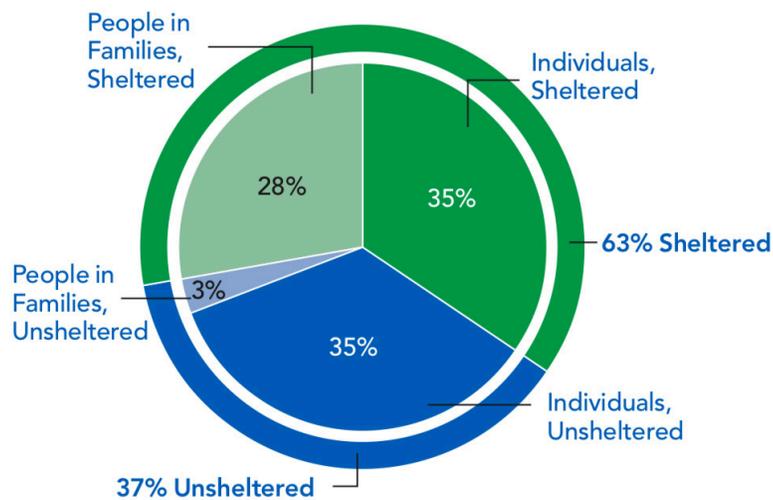
4.7%

2,365 Homeless
110 Unsheltered

Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Homelessness

By Household Type and Sheltered Status, 2019



Source: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

EVALUATION OF PROPOSALS



How should governments work to address the homelessness crisis?

The following pages contain four proposals that the government, at various levels, could incorporate into its policies to fight homelessness. Consider the pros and cons of each proposal, conduct any additional research, and answer or discuss the following questions:

- Which proposal(s), if any, do you favor? Why?
- Which proposal(s), if any, would you change? How?
- Which proposal(s), if any, would you reject? Why?
- Are there any other proposals that you would put forward? Explain your answer.

HOW SHOULD GOVERNMENTS WORK TO ADDRESS THE HOMELESSNESS CRISIS?

OPTION	WHAT SUPPORTERS SAY	WHAT OPPONENTS SAY
<p>1. Cities should enact laws that ban homeless people from sleeping on the street if shelter beds are available. In November 2019, the Las Vegas City Council passed an ordinance that outlaws sleeping or camping in public spaces downtown and in residential areas if there are beds available at established shelters (with exemptions in place for people with medical emergencies or disabilities). Violators could be charged with a misdemeanor crime, punishable by up to six months in jail and/or a \$1,000 fine.⁶</p>	<p>Make no mistake: It is not compassion to allow homeless people to sleep on the street. The rise of unchecked camping in public spaces has not helped the homeless; it has made their problems much worse. Homeless camping litters public spaces with garbage and human waste, it encourages lawlessness, and it makes homeless people more vulnerable to crime, substance abuse, and serious health problems that go untreated. It is not fair to Americans across the country—whether they be housed or not—to allow their public streets and parks, their neighborhoods, and their small business storefronts to turn into homeless encampments. By banning camping when shelter beds are available, cities would be encouraging homeless people to seek warmth, safety, sanitation, and other services that they need, while also encouraging the continued building of shelters. This is what compassion looks like.</p>	<p>If cities pass laws that ban homeless people from sleeping or camping in public spaces, they will be doing little more than punishing poverty. It is not a crime to be poor or to be unable to afford housing. Therefore, the homeless population should not be subject to threats of jail time and fines for simply attempting to find a place to sleep outside. Policies such as the Las Vegas ordinance place the interests of businesses over the interests of the vulnerable poor, leaving poverty-stricken Americans with even fewer options than they already have. “This is not a real solution,” said Las Vegas resident Gary Peck. “It’s just one more law that cops and prosecutors can use to sweep homeless people out of sight and out of mind.”⁷ Cities cannot arrest their way out of the homelessness crisis; they must proactively provide housing for the people who need it most.</p>
<p>2. Cities and states should enact housing-first programs. In 2005, Salt Lake City began implementing a program to use city, state, and private funds on the construction of new housing complexes for homeless people with on-site counseling to assist residents with mental health, substance abuse, and unemployment issues.</p>	<p>Cities struggling with homelessness, such as Los Angeles, Portland, and San Francisco, have much to learn from Salt Lake City. By spending \$20 million per year and raising more than \$20 million in additional donations from the Mormon Church and other nonprofit organizations, Salt Lake City was able to create attractive, desirable housing complexes generously staffed with counselors to assist residents with mental health, substance abuse, and unemployment issues, providing a place for homeless people to begin living healthier, supported lives right away.⁸ The effect? In the decade leading up to 2015, Utah reduced chronic homelessness by 91 percent.⁹ “What we’ve done is doable everywhere,” said the late Lloyd Pendleton, then the director of Utah’s homeless initiatives. “It’s not rocket science. Homeless people need housing. Give it to them. And give them counseling.”¹⁰</p>	<p>Housing-first programs are a noble idea, but the execution rarely lives up to the promise. Take Salt Lake City, a one-time success story. Between 2016 and 2018, the state of Utah found that the number of people sleeping outdoors in Salt Lake City nearly doubled. Why? In the face of rising land and housing prices, as well as a nationwide opioid epidemic, the city simply did not have the funds to continue building housing for the homeless.¹¹ Or, take San Francisco, which has made the mistake of building much of its supportive housing in the Tenderloin (a neighborhood long affected by homelessness and drug use), rather than seeking to distance the newly housed from their old circumstances.¹² In short, too many cities and states lack the funding and vision to successfully implement housing-first programs, leaving only wasted dollars in their wake.</p>

HOW SHOULD GOVERNMENTS WORK TO ADDRESS THE HOMELESSNESS CRISIS?

OPTION	WHAT SUPPORTERS SAY	WHAT OPPONENTS SAY
<p>3. The federal government should boost funding for Section 8 Housing Choice Vouchers. Section 8 is a federal rent assistance program for low-income Americans. In general, a family’s income may not exceed 50 percent of the median income for the county or metropolitan area in question. People who meet the requirements can apply for a voucher; if they are approved and selected, and find their own housing, the local housing authority sends federal payments to the landlord to cover some or all of the rent. The program served some five million people in 2018, but the demand for vouchers often exceeds the resources available.¹³ Former Vice President Joe Biden and Senator Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., have called for making Section 8 vouchers available to all eligible households; Senator Sanders has quoted the price tag as \$410 billion over ten years.¹⁴</p>	<p>“Roughly three in four households eligible for Section 8 rental assistance do not receive housing assistance because the program is underfunded,” noted Vice President Biden.¹⁵ This must change. If the federal government decides to boost funding for Section 8 and make these rental vouchers available to all eligible households, it will help low-income Americans make ends meet. Such a program would target vulnerable families who need help the most and help stop homelessness before it begins. “Today, 7.7 million families in America are forced to pay more than half of their limited incomes on rent because they are eligible for Section 8 rental assistance but do not receive it because of a lack of federal resources,” wrote Senator Sanders. “As a result, many of these families are forced to choose between paying rent or buying food, medicine, or prescription drugs they need. That is unacceptable.”¹⁶</p>	<p>With the United States more than \$23 trillion in debt, it may sound like a drop in the bucket to spend \$410 billion on rent subsidies over the next decade. However, it is irresponsible for the government to promise a sweeping new entitlement program when it soon will not be able to afford its commitments to Social Security and other existing entitlements. Dramatically boosting funding for Section 8 would be little more than a band-aid solution that does nothing to assist homeless people in getting off the street. It would provide no intervention for those who desperately need substance abuse or mental health treatment. And it would do nothing to encourage landlords to bring rents down. All this policy would do is feed the federal government’s spending problem and create a whole new class of Americans who are utterly dependent on the government.</p>
<p>4. The federal government should enact nationwide rent control. A policy put forward by Senator Sanders would cap annual rent increases at three percent or 1.5 times the Consumer Price Index (whichever is higher).¹⁷</p>	<p>“We are in the midst of an eviction crisis,” noted Senator Sanders. “At least two million renters throughout the country are at risk of losing their homes each year. Evictions, often over as little as \$100, cause tremendous stress on families and can lead to worse health outcomes, job losses, and an unacceptable disruption in a child’s education.”¹⁸ In too many communities across the country, neighborhoods are being rapidly gentrified, and technology-related boom economies are leading to highly competitive housing markets and significant rent increases. By enacting Senator Sanders’ nationwide rent control policy, the federal government would be protecting renters from dramatic annual increases in rent—increases that can leave cash-strapped tenants out on the street. The government must step in to protect renters as their neighborhoods become more expensive and more in-demand.</p>	<p>To understand the disastrous effects of rent control, one need only examine Los Angeles, New York City, San Francisco, and other cities that use this policy. Rent control has not only failed to keep prices down; it has created the most expensive rental markets in the nation. When the government forces landlords to keep rents artificially low, tenants lose all incentive to move. As a result, the supply of affordable housing dries up. Tenants stay where they are, so there are few options for people who move into the market. Construction of new rental housing stops, as being a landlord is no longer profitable. Landlords opt to convert their rental properties into Airbnbs or condominiums, rather than rent them at below-market rates. And when tenants do finally move out, landlords are forced to drive up prices for the next tenant, as they may not be able to raise rents again for some time.</p>



- ¹ Henry, Meghan, Rian Watt, Anna Mahathey, Jillian Ouellette, and Aubrey Sitler. *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Jan. 2020. Web. 3 Mar. 2020.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ National Alliance to End Homelessness. "Housing." Jan. 2020. Web. 3 Mar. 2020.
- ⁵ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "HUD 2019 Continuum of Care Homeless Assistance Programs Homeless Populations and Subpopulations." 20 Sep. 2019. Web. 3 Mar. 2020.
- ⁶ Johnson, Shea, and Briana Erickson. "Las Vegas Passes Controversial Homeless Camping Ban." *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. 6 Nov. 2019. Web. 4 Mar. 2020.
- ⁷ Allyn, Bobby. "Las Vegas Bans Sleeping, Camping in Public Places." NPR. 7 Nov. 2019. Web. 4 Mar. 2020.
- ⁸ Fagan, Kevin. "Salt Lake City a Model for S.F. on Homeless Solutions." *San Francisco Chronicle*. 29 Jun. 2014. Web. 6 Mar. 2020.
- ⁹ Scruggs, Gregory. "Once a National Model, Utah Struggles with Homelessness." Reuters. 10 Jan. 2019. Web. 6 Mar. 2020.
- ¹⁰ Fagan, Kevin. "Salt Lake City a Model for S.F. on Homeless Solutions." *San Francisco Chronicle*. 29 Jun. 2014. Web. 6 Mar. 2020.
- ¹¹ Scruggs, Gregory. "Once a National Model, Utah Struggles with Homelessness." Reuters. 10 Jan. 2019. Web. 6 Mar. 2020.
- ¹² Fagan, Kevin. "Salt Lake City a Model for S.F. on Homeless Solutions." *San Francisco Chronicle*. 29 Jun. 2014. Web. 6 Mar. 2020.
- ¹³ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "Housing Choice Vouchers Fact Sheet." Web. 4 Mar. 2020. Miller, Maya. "What You Need to Know About How Section 8 Really Works." ProPublica. 9 Jan. 2020. Web. 4 Mar. 2020.
- ¹⁴ JoeBiden.com. "The Biden Plan for Investing in Our Communities Through Housing." Web. 4 Mar. 2020. BernieSanders.com. "Housing for All." Web. 4 Mar. 2020.
- ¹⁵ JoeBiden.com. "The Biden Plan for Investing in Our Communities Through Housing." Web. 4 Mar. 2020.
- ¹⁶ BernieSanders.com. "Housing for All." Web. 6 Mar. 2020.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.



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