



Homelessness – Common Questions & Answers

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Question: I hear that homeless people don't really want housing. Don't they choose that lifestyle?

ANSWER: The main driver of homelessness is actually a lack of affordable housing.

Homelessness has been increasing in Washington State since 2013, caused by growing rents pushing people living at the margins into homelessness. There aren't enough affordable units for people with the lowest incomes in our state and when rents go up, people 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 in Washington State here: <https://nlihc.org/oor/washington> and why homelessness is increasing here: <http://www.commerce.wa.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/hau-why-homelessness-increase-2017.pdf>

Homelessness is stressful and dangerous. People experiencing homelessness are often the victims of hate crimes; 1,500 reported attacks occurred nationwide on homeless people in the past 15 years with 375 ending in death; 91 people died while homeless in King County in 2015. (Source: <http://bit.ly/29fPg9R>).

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, and there is not enough housing assistance available for those who need it.

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

ANSWER: Most people who are experiencing homelessness are living in the same city in which they became homeless.

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.

Question: Most people are really homeless because they made bad choices or are lazy, right?

ANSWER: 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 racially and sexually minoritized populations which have a strong correlation to historical and institutional discrimination.

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

ANSWER: Actually, Housing First, which provides immediate housing without preconditions, is a successful approach to ending homelessness.

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.

Research indicates that 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.

(<http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/housing-first-fact-sheet.pdf>)

Question: Most people experience homelessness because they make poor choices, like using drugs or alcohol, right?

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

In Washington State, 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, drives people to substance abuse. It is often mistakenly assumed that alcoholics and drug users lack moral principles or willpower and that 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 those who are mentally ill, the options are not much better. Despite about \$900 million in 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 percent of King County's homeless 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: Aren't most people who are homeless violent, dangerous and/or lawbreakers?

ANSWER: A person who is homeless is no more likely to be a criminal than a housed person, with one legal exception: camping ordinances

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

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

ANSWER: 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 offenders with no fixed address are particularly stringent compared to most housed offenders. They are obliged 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 (5.3%) than that of many other categories of crime. (Source: <http://bit.ly/29hYItT>)