

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT HOMELESSNESS



What does it mean to “experience homelessness”?

A person experiences homelessness when he/she resides in places not meant for human habitation, such as cars, parks, sidewalks, and abandoned buildings; or in an emergency shelter; or in transitional housing.

How many people experience homelessness?

On a single night in January of 2020, 11,751 people experienced homelessness in the city of Seattle, with 53% sheltered and 47% unsheltered. This total reflects a five percent increase compared to the 2019 count. In the United States on a given night in January of 2020, 567,715 people experienced homelessness. This number of people would fill the Seahawks stadium nearly eight times.

What percentage of people experiencing homelessness are families with children?

Of the 11,751 people experiencing homelessness in Seattle in January of 2020, 3,743 (32%) are people in family households. This means at least one member of their family unit is younger than 18-years-old.

Where do people experiencing homelessness find shelter?

Of the 53% of people experiencing homelessness who have shelter in Seattle, most stayed the previous night in an emergency shelter. The next most common options for shelter included a vehicle, a transitional housing option or an abandoned building.

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the number of people experiencing homelessness?

Those experiencing homelessness in Seattle have become increasingly vulnerable through the pandemic due to unstable economic conditions and an increase in unemployment. While data has not yet been released, an increase in homelessness is predicted in 2021.

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Do people ever stop being homeless?

A majority of people who experience homelessness will not remain homeless forever, but rather are undergoing difficult circumstances like job loss, a health crisis or family instability. For many of these folks, the right support network can move them into a more stable housing situation. In January of 2020, 28.5% report being chronically homeless.

Why do people become homeless?

There is no simple answer to this question because the factors leading a person to experience homelessness are often a complex and layered web; with one factor compounding with others, making it difficult to find a way out of the web.

Data from January 2020, shows that the most common reason for homelessness is job loss (16%). For those living paycheck to paycheck something as simple as an injury can impede a person's ability to afford rent. Alcohol or drug use is the second most cited factor (11%). Mental health struggles (8%) and the inability to afford rent (8%) were the next most common responses.

While these numbers offer some clarity around risk factors, it's important to keep in mind the complexity of causation. One of the most common predictors of homelessness is an adverse childhood experience (ACE). While this isn't something a person would offer as a reason for their homelessness, studies have proven a direct correlation between the two.

Another important factor in homelessness is a history of system and institutionalized racism in our city. Native Americans/Alaskan Native native people make up 1% of the population in King County, but account for 15% of those experiencing homelessness. Similarly, Black and Latino people also are disproportionately represented in Seattle homelessness data.

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What can we do to help those experiencing homelessness in our city?

Be Kind || People experiencing homelessness often talk of feeling “invisible.” Engaging with folks who are unhoused by making eye contact, waving, or asking “how is your day going?” can go a long way in affirming their identity as a child of God, loved by God.

Be Curious || Often the plight of homelessness is oversimplified in news or media and equated to substance abuse or poor decision-making. Learning about the many layers and stories behind homelessness humanizes the “issue” and helps us to respond in a Christlike and compassionate way.

Be Generous || While giving money directly to folks asking for help is unwise, offering food or specific items can certainly be helpful. Also, Seattle is home to many non-profit organizations like Aurora Commons, who are committed to supporting unhoused folks in our community and helping them flourish. Consider making a financial donation to a local organization.

Be Active || Learn about policies in our nation, state and city that impact those experiencing homelessness. Use your voice and your vote to encourage Kingdom-oriented change.

Be Christlike || Read through the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) and take note of how often Jesus interacts with the poor and vulnerable. How should this shape our attitude and response to the poor and vulnerable in our city?

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Are there additional resources to help me learn more?

- Aurora Commons Website || auroracommons.org

Learn more about the nature of homelessness in Seattle, and effective approaches to helping those who are unhoused in our city.

- Outsiders Podcast

This podcast, co-hosted by the Seattle Times, offers a first-person view of homelessness in Olympia, WA. It humanizes the “issue” of homelessness in a way that invites compassion, while also being tremendously informative.

- CDC Website || www.cdc.gov

The Center For Disease Control offers helpful information around homelessness from a perspective of public health, including legal and policy approaches to addressing homelessness.

*** Statistics provided are from the 2020 Point-in-Time count, required by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).**