

**FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

# FAQs

**Q.**  
**What is homelessness?**

**A.**  
Being without a stable place to call home is the simplest definition of homelessness. This includes living in emergency shelters and staying in cars, abandoned buildings, and other places not meant for human habitation. The U.S. government provides several operational definitions that cover different ranges of living situations that qualify as being homeless<sup>1</sup>. Homelessness can lead people to lose their jobs, experience violence or trauma, new or exacerbated health problems, and premature mortality. Homelessness occurs everywhere in the United States.

**Q.**  
**Who experiences homelessness?**

**A.**  
All types of people experience homelessness. Households with lower incomes are more vulnerable to homelessness. For most people, homelessness is a relatively brief, one-time occurrence. But for some people, homelessness can be long-term or be cyclical with repeated episodes.

People who have chronic and complex health conditions or disabilities (including medical conditions, mental illnesses, and substance use disorders) and experience long-term homelessness are described as experiencing chronic homelessness. Without stable housing, they cycle in and out of emergency departments, hospitals, psychiatric centers, treatment programs, and jails, resulting in high public costs and poor health outcomes.

**Q.**  
**What causes homelessness?**

**A.**  
A wide range of structural factors cause homelessness: rising housing costs and an insufficient supply of affordable housing, an unstable job market, and lack of access to healthcare, including behavioral health services. Racial and ethnic discrimination in housing, income, and healthcare increases the risk of becoming homeless, with White people and Asian people significantly under-represented among the homeless population. Unexpected income changes due to a crisis—job, health, or family break-ups—can result in loss of stable housing, especially when social and economic supports are unavailable.

**Q.**  
**Why are people homeless and unsheltered?**

**A.**  
Upon becoming homeless, people live in unsheltered situations when there is an insufficient supply of housing, including shelters, or when there are shortcomings with the quality of the shelter facilities. (See response to the question, “Why don’t people living in unsheltered situations go to shelter?” later in this document for further information.)

**Q.**

**When people are unsheltered, where do they go?**

**A.**

When people are unsheltered, they stay in makeshift arrangements such as cars, RVs without access to power or sanitation, abandoned buildings, public parks, and other places not meant for human habitation. These arrangements can conflict with other uses of public spaces and can bring people in unsheltered circumstances into repeated contact with police and other law enforcement entities.

**Q.**

**What are the most significant consequences of homelessness for the people who experience it?**

**A.**

Homelessness takes a substantial toll on health, and the longer a person is homeless, the more extensive this toll is likely to be. Unsheltered homelessness is particularly unforgiving in this respect. A recent study by the California Policy Lab<sup>2</sup> found that people who are unsheltered have a higher prevalence of major health conditions than their sheltered counterparts, along with more extensive experiences with abuse and trauma. Their unsheltered circumstances not only exacerbate these conditions but also create additional barriers to accessing needed health care and related services. Conversely, unsheltered circumstances make it more likely for them to be the focus of policing efforts and other emergency responses. This goes at least some ways toward explaining increased levels of mortality and reduced life expectancy (in the low-60s age range) that researchers have found among the homeless population.

**Q.**

**What can be done about homelessness?**

**A.**

The most effective, long-term response to homelessness is permanent, affordable housing. Research has repeatedly shown that most persons who are homeless are receptive to being permanently housed and, once placed, can maintain this housing given appropriate financial and services support. Housing First approaches are most effective at ensuring that people are connected to permanent housing swiftly, directly, and with as few obstacles as possible (see Resources section). When communities offer a range of housing options that have varying degrees of tolerance for substance use, this provides a safer environment for people experiencing homelessness who are often marginalized, stigmatized, and vulnerable because of poverty and behavioral health disorders.

**Q.**

**Who is responsible for solving homelessness?**

**A.**

Cross-sector, collaborative partnerships are essential to organizing an effective homeless assistance system that provides both crisis response and a pathway to long-term stability. These partnerships require commitment and participation by elected officials, business leaders, and systems like healthcare, justice, housing, and human services, as well as community and faith-based organizations, in partnership with homeless assistance providers. Support from the public for solutions, effective policies, and housing and facilities across the community is also required.

**Q.**

**Why are bans on camping not effective?**

**A.**

Bans on camping have not been shown to reduce unsheltered homelessness; instead, enforcement shifts people from one location to another—much like a game of “whack-a-mole”—causing further trauma and harm to the individual who is forced to move along. People who are subjected to repeated move-along orders can become less willing to seek and engage in services (see Resources section).

Enforcement actions that remove a campsite without protecting an individual’s personal property can increase the time they are homeless. The loss of critical personal documents (e.g., identification, birth certificates, etc.) impedes individuals from receiving support services and obtaining employment. The loss of other essential belongings— medication, work shoes, or tools—can make it difficult to even function in daily life.

If camping leads to a citation or arrest related to violating an anti-camping ordinance, the individual will have even greater difficulty in getting a job or apartment as they will now have a criminal record. In 2018, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, which covers nine states in the western U.S., ruled in *Boise v. Martin* that enforcing a ban on people sleeping in public when they have no access to adequate/appropriate shelter as an alternative is unconstitutional. The court stated, “the government cannot criminalize indigent, homeless people for sleeping outdoors, on public property, on the false premise they had a choice in the matter.”<sup>3</sup>

**Q.**

**Why don’t people living in unsheltered situations go to shelter?**

**A.**

Shelter simply does not exist in many communities. When it is present, it is often not in adequate supply. Despite the prospect of protection from the elements and the possibility of “three hots and a cot” (meaning meals and shelter), there are a host of other reasons why people who are experiencing homelessness may shun shelters. Limits on length of stay in emergency shelters present a significant barrier for people who need time to work, save, and find housing. Curfews and requirements that people leave during the day with their possessions can make it difficult — or even impossible — to maintain or effectively seek employment. Punitive enforcement of excessive rules and requirements can be a barrier to entering and staying in an emergency shelter. Congregate dormitories often are unsuitable for people with health or psychiatric conditions. The inability of shelters to accommodate parents with children, as well as pets, partners, and possessions, can also be deterrents. A lack of parking, a fee for an overnight stay after a couple of free nights, or a requirement to attend religious services are barriers for many. Some shelters are in geographically inaccessible areas or neighborhoods perceived as dangerous. People may have concerns about personal safety, especially in facilities that are large, understaffed, or both. Sometimes, previous negative experience with a shelter prevents individuals from entering. Some people report feeling safer and more in control of their lives by camping or otherwise staying in outdoor settings while they work to figure out a path back to stable housing.

In contrast, an increasing number of shelters are taking a “low-barrier” approach, which involves meeting people where they are—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. Low-barrier shelters provide a level of services, safety, support, and accommodation so that people find them better than staying in unsheltered circumstances. *See separate [Special Topic: low-barrier approaches brief](#).*

**Q.**  
**Are panhandlers really homeless?**

**A.**  
Not all people who panhandle are homeless, and only a very small proportion of people who are homeless engage in panhandling. However, there is a substantial overlap between people who panhandle and those who are homeless. And while some people spend their panhandling income on alcohol or illicit drugs, “a significant portion of panhandlers we have met do not abuse substances; they would not be able to panhandle effectively if they did. Even those who do use alcohol or drugs extensively consume some food. In Union Square [New York City], 94 percent of panhandlers said they spent money on food, and 44 percent said they spent money on drugs or alcohol, and spending money is not necessarily the same as abuse.”<sup>4</sup>

**Q.**  
**Are there examples of effective local law enforcement approaches that are non-punitive and achieve more effective and lasting outcomes in addressing homelessness?**

**A.**  
Some law enforcement agencies have adopted a range of practices that are both non-punitive and effective (see Resources section). In place of arrest, citation, or aggressive ‘move-along’ orders, some police departments work closely with homeless outreach providers to engage and link unsheltered individuals to shelter, services, and housing. Some departments deploy specially trained police officers to perform engagement and casework activities typically executed by homeless services providers, including assistance in finding housing. Other departments utilize specialized police teams affiliated with mental health providers to engage unsheltered people who display behaviors associated with mental illness and substance use disorders. Some jails have put in place practices to avoid homelessness upon discharge. Several study sites were using Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD<sup>®</sup>), a pre-arrest diversion program redirecting low-level drug and other offenders to intensive case management. LEAD teams frequently engage people who are living in unsheltered situations.

# RESOURCES

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- ▶ U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness (2019). The Evidence Behind Approaches that Drive an End to Homelessness. Available at: [https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset\\_library/Evidence-Behind-Approaches-That-End-Homelessness-Brief-2019.pdf](https://www.usich.gov/resources/uploads/asset_library/Evidence-Behind-Approaches-That-End-Homelessness-Brief-2019.pdf)
- ▶ U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and Council of State Governments Justice Center (2019). Strengthening Partnerships Between Law Enforcement and Homeless service Systems. Available at: <https://www.usich.gov/tools-for-action/strengthening-partnerships-between-law-enforcement-and-homelessness-services-systems/>

## SOLUTIONS BASED ON EVIDENCE

Arnold Ventures (AV) is a philanthropic organization with the mission to invest in evidence-based solutions that maximize opportunities and minimize injustice. AV supported a study to identify practices and policies that promote alternatives to using punitive and enforcement-based measures as the primary responses to unsheltered homelessness. Project investigators conducted a three-day visit in spring–summer 2019 to each of nine sites for an in-person review of community-specific initiatives. The sites represent the major regions of the U.S. and include cities of different sizes as well as rural, suburban, and tribal areas and provide an array of different socioeconomic contexts and present different local housing market configurations.

1 See Definitions & Terms

2 California Policy Lab (2019). Health Conditions Among Unsheltered Adults in the U.S. Available at: <https://www.capolicylab.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Health-Conditions-Among-Unsheltered-Adults-in-the-U.S.pdf>.

3 Martin v. City of Boise, No. 15-35845 (Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals 2018).

4 Gwendolyn Dordick, Brendan O’Flaherty, Jakob Brounstein and Srishti Sinha (2018) “Policy for Panhandling: How to Encourage Good Panhandling and Discourage Bad.” European Journal of Homelessness, available at: <https://www.feantsa.org/en/european-journal-of-homelessness/2018/09/01/european-journal-of-homelessness-volume-12>, page 86.

