

# *Finding Solutions For Homelessness*



The morning commute in downtown Seattle brought Janet face-to-face with the same man she'd seen for months.

He sat huddled under a tattered blue tarp, his belongings packed into a weathered shopping cart.

She had watched his health visibly deteriorate through the changing seasons. Some days she gave him coffee or a few dollars, but she knew these small kindnesses weren't solving the deeper problem.

Janet often wondered:

Why, in one of the wealthiest nations on earth, was this man living on the street?

And what would actually help him?

This scene plays out in cities and towns across America.

From the tent encampments spreading under highway overpasses to the solitary figures sleeping in doorways, homelessness has become a painfully visible feature of American life.

Many of us have become so accustomed to seeing people without homes that we barely notice anymore.

We step around someone sleeping on a sidewalk or avert our eyes as we hurry past, unsure what to do or how to help.

But this collective resignation isn't inevitable. Homelessness isn't a natural disaster or an unsolvable puzzle.

It's a human-made crisis with human-designed solutions. Communities across

America and around the world have developed effective approaches that not only reduce homelessness but save money and transform lives in the process.

## **Understanding the Crisis**

Homelessness in the United States is an urgent public health issue and humanitarian crisis. It impacts cities, suburbs, and rural towns in every state. Housing is a social determinant of health, meaning lack of it has a negative impact on overall health and life

expectancy.

Tens of thousands<sup>33</sup> of people die every year due to the dangerous conditions of living without housing—conditions that have worsened due to climate change’s rise in extreme weather. People who experience homelessness die nearly 30 years earlier than the average American—and often from easily treatable illnesses.

Before we can address homelessness, we need to understand it. Approximately 580,000 Americans experience homelessness on any given night. This includes families with children, veterans who served our country, young people, seniors, and individuals struggling with disabilities, addiction, or mental health challenges.

Contrary to common assumptions, homelessness rarely results from a single personal failing. Instead, it emerges from a complex interplay of structural problems and individual circumstances.

Skyrocketing housing costs, stagnant wages, inadequate mental health services, and disappearing safety nets have created a perfect storm where even small personal setbacks—a medical bill, a job loss, or a family breakdown—can lead to losing one's home.

The typical homeless American might surprise you. Many work full or part-time jobs but still can't afford housing. Others have disabilities that prevent employment but receive benefits too meager to cover rent.

Some struggle with addiction or mental illness without access to appropriate care. Many are children and teens, either with families or on their own after escaping abuse or rejection.

**18%**

**Increase in  
the number of  
homeless  
people in the  
US in 2024**

**This is the  
highest  
recorded  
number of  
homeless in  
history**



<sup>33</sup> <https://nhchc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Homeless-Mortality-Toolkit-FULL-FINAL.pdf>

These Americans aren't fundamentally different from those with homes. They've simply encountered circumstances their resources couldn't overcome.

As housing costs continue rising faster than wages, millions more Americans live precariously close to homelessness, often just one missed paycheck or unexpected expense away from losing their homes.

In a typical year, U.S. landlords pursue eviction on 3.6 million occasions<sup>34</sup>. Evictions occur for many reasons, but the inability to afford rising rent costs is one of the biggest<sup>35</sup>.

More than 70% of extremely low-wage households spend more than half of their income on rent<sup>36</sup>, and every \$100 increase in median rent is associated with a 9% rise<sup>37</sup> in homelessness.

## Homelessness Fact vs. Fiction

There are many myths about the causes of and solutions to homelessness, particularly the “Housing First” approach that has been proven by decades of research<sup>38</sup> to be effective and cost-effective. Below are some of the most common myths—and the reality surrounding them:

**Myth:** People experiencing homelessness just need to get a job.

**Fact:** While employment helps people stay housed, it does not guarantee housing. As many as 40%-60% of people experiencing homelessness have a job, but housing is unaffordable because wages have not kept up with rising rents.

There is no county or state where a full-time minimum-wage worker can afford a modest apartment. At minimum wage, people have to work 86 hours a week<sup>39</sup> to afford a one-bedroom.

Even when people can afford a home, one is not always available. In 1970, the United States had a surplus of 300,000 affordable homes. Today, only 37 affordable homes<sup>40</sup> are available for every 100 extremely low-income renters.

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<sup>34</sup> <https://evictionlab.org/new-eviction-data-2022/>

<sup>35</sup> <https://theappeal.org/the-lab/explainers/the-american-eviction-crisis-explained/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://nlihc.org/gap/about>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-20-433>

<sup>38</sup> <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/data-visualization-the-evidence-on-housing-first/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://nlihc.org/oor/about>

<sup>40</sup> <https://nlihc.org/news/nlihc-releases-gap-2023-shortage-affordable-homes>

As a result, 70% of the lowest-wage households spend more than half their income on rent, placing them at high risk of homelessness when unexpected expenses (such as car repairs and medical bills) arise.

**Myth:** People experiencing homelessness choose to live outside in tents or cars.

**Fact:** Homelessness usually happens because of economic reasons (such as job loss), and many people have nowhere else to go but outside. Many shelters are full or limited to people who are sober, straight, free of disability or criminal history, and/or willing to separate from their children, partners, or pets.

These discriminatory policies leave parents, couples, pet owners, LGBTQI+ members, and people with addictions, disabilities, or criminal records on the streets, where they live in constant fear of hunger, violence, storms, and infectious disease.

“Out of sight, out of mind” laws that make it illegal to sit or sleep in public outdoor spaces only exacerbate the revolving door between homelessness and incarceration, and they do not solve homelessness. Housing and supports solve homelessness—not handcuffs.

**Myth:** People experiencing homelessness are dangerous and violent.

**Fact:** Not having a home does not make someone a criminal, just like having a home does not make someone innocent of any and all crimes. According to data, people experiencing homelessness are far more likely to be victims of violent crime than to commit violent crime.

But because of the infrequency of violent crimes committed by people experiencing homelessness, they tend to be considered “newsworthy” and attract more media

73%

Housing First clients  
remaining housed  
after 1 year

31%

Treatment First  
clients remaining  
housed after 1 year



attention.

**Myth:** Most people experiencing homelessness have a substance use and/or mental health disorder.

**Fact:** While rates of homelessness for people with severe mental health or substance use disorders are high, the majority of people with no home also have no mental health or substance use disorder. Furthermore, the large majority of Americans with mental health or substance use disorders do not experience homelessness, demonstrating that mental health and substance use disorders do not cause homelessness.

**Myth:** Homelessness is not preventable.

**Fact:** Homelessness is a policy choice, and the COVID-19 pandemic proved the power of prevention.

During the pandemic, governments instituted eviction moratoriums, deployed emergency rental assistance, expanded unemployment assistance and the Child Tax Credit, and issued cash directly to millions of lower-income Americans.

In effect, poverty dropped by 45%, millions of evictions were prevented, and homelessness remained steady during a time when a surge in homelessness would have been expected.

## Two Paths Forward: Treatment First vs. Housing First

For decades, America has primarily approached homelessness through what's known as the "Treatment First" model. This approach considers homelessness primarily as a result of personal problems that need fixing before someone can maintain stable housing. Under this model, homeless individuals must progress through a series of steps—typically addressing addiction, mental health issues, or unemployment—before "earning" permanent housing.

A Treatment First program might require someone to complete substance abuse treatment, maintain sobriety for a specified period, participate in therapy, secure employment, and demonstrate "housing readiness" through transitional programs. Only after completing these steps would they qualify for permanent housing assistance.

The Treatment First model appeals to our intuition about personal responsibility and redemption. It seems logical that someone should solve underlying problems before

receiving significant help. However, this approach has produced disappointing results after decades of implementation.

Many people, especially those with complex challenges, struggle to complete all required steps while still homeless. Imagine trying to attend regular therapy appointments, maintain medication schedules, stay sober, or hold down a job while sleeping in a shelter or on the streets.

Beginning in the 1990s, a fundamentally different approach emerged: Housing First. This model turns the traditional sequence upside down by providing permanent housing immediately, without preconditions, followed by supportive services. Housing First operates on a simple premise: housing is a basic need, not a reward for good behavior. Once someone has the stability of a home, they can more effectively address other challenges.

In a Housing First program, a homeless person receives housing as quickly as possible, typically with rental assistance or in dedicated supportive housing units. They aren't required to be sober, employed, or in treatment to qualify.

Once housed, they receive access to voluntary support services addressing their specific needs, whether that's mental health treatment, substance abuse counseling, employment assistance, or help managing finances.

Housing First doesn't ignore personal challenges or absolve individuals of responsibility. Rather, it recognizes that housing stability creates the foundation necessary for people to effectively address these issues. It's much easier to attend therapy appointments, maintain medication regimens, search for jobs, or work on sobriety when you have a safe, stable place to sleep each night.

**80%**

**Decrease in  
the number of  
homeless  
people in  
Finland using  
thier Housing  
First model  
with 10 years**



## **The Evidence of Success**

The contrast between these approaches isn't just theoretical—it's been tested extensively in communities across America and around the world. The results consistently favor Housing First.

In Utah, a statewide Housing First initiative reduced chronic homelessness by 91% between 2005 and 2015. The program provided permanent housing coupled with case management services, dramatically changing lives while saving taxpayer dollars.

Finland has become the only European country where homelessness is continuously decreasing. Their national Housing First policy converted traditional shelters into permanent supportive housing units and built new housing specifically for formerly homeless people. Between 2008 and 2018, the number of homeless people in Finland fell by 35%, with long-term homelessness reduced by over 60%.

Canada's At Home/Chez Soi project, the largest Housing First study ever conducted, followed 2,000 participants across five cities for several years. The research found that Housing First rapidly ended homelessness for people with both moderate and high needs, with 80% of participants remaining housed throughout the study.

Even in cities facing severe affordable housing shortages, Housing First programs show impressive results.

Houston reduced homelessness by 54% between 2011 and 2019 through a coordinated Housing First approach. Denver's Social Impact Bond program demonstrated that 83% of Housing First participants remained in stable housing after one year.

While success stories abound for Housing First programs, treatment-first approaches typically show much more modest results.

Traditional transitional housing programs often see only 30-40% of participants successfully transition to permanent housing. Many drop out along the way, unable to meet strict requirements while still experiencing the trauma and chaos of homelessness.

## **The Unexpected Economic Case**

Beyond the human impact, Housing First offers surprising economic benefits. While providing free housing might seem expensive, it often costs less than managing homelessness through emergency services, law enforcement, and temporary shelters.

Studies consistently show that homeless individuals frequently cycle through emergency rooms, jails, detox centers, and psychiatric hospitals—all at taxpayer expense. A chronically homeless person might cost public systems \$30,000 to \$50,000 per year without their situation improving.

**Consider these real-world examples:**

In Denver, a study found the city spent approximately \$43,240 per year on emergency services, detox, jail, and health costs for each chronically homeless person. After moving into Housing First programs, the same individuals cost about \$17,000 per year, saving taxpayers \$26,000 annually per person while dramatically improving outcomes.

Central Florida's Commission on Homelessness calculated that the region spent \$31,000 per chronically homeless person each year on law enforcement and medical costs. Providing Housing First would cost just \$10,000 per person annually, representing significant savings while better addressing the problem.

Seattle's "Jail Diversion Program" demonstrated that Housing First reduced interactions with the criminal justice system by 80% among participants. Each night spent in jail costs taxpayers between \$75 and \$190, while permanent supportive housing in the area costs about \$36 per night while producing better long-term outcomes.

These savings materialize because housing stability reduces emergency room visits, psychiatric hospitalizations, detox services, and jail stays. People with homes use fewer emergency services and more scheduled, preventive care. They experience fewer crises requiring expensive interventions. And when they do need help, they're easier to locate and serve effectively.

**\$1.44**

**Savings in costs for every dollar invested in the United States using Housing First programs**



Furthermore, Housing First programs reduce the high costs associated with managing homeless encampments, including sanitation services, law enforcement responses, and environmental remediation. These activities consume substantial municipal resources without addressing the underlying problem.

## **Beyond the Numbers: Changing Lives**

While the economic argument for Housing First is compelling, the human impact transcends dollars and cents. Housing provides more than physical shelter—it creates the psychological safety necessary for healing and growth.

James, a Vietnam veteran, spent eight years living under bridges in Phoenix after losing his job and housing during a PTSD episode. Traditional programs required sobriety he couldn't maintain while homeless.

A Housing First program gave him an apartment without preconditions. Within six months, with a case manager's support, he voluntarily entered substance abuse treatment. Today, five years later, he's sober, reconnected with family, and working part-time at a local hardware store.

Maria and her two children became homeless after fleeing domestic violence in Chicago. The stress of shelter life made it impossible for her to focus on finding work or addressing trauma.

A Housing First program provided an apartment where her family could stabilize. With that foundation, Maria completed job training, found employment, and began therapy. Her children's school performance improved dramatically once they had a stable home.

These stories represent thousands of similar transformations happening wherever Housing First takes root. The approach works because it addresses the fundamental human need for safety and stability before tackling complex personal challenges.

## **Challenges and Limitations**

Despite its success, Housing First isn't without challenges. The approach requires significant upfront investment in affordable housing units, which many communities lack. It depends on sustained funding for both housing subsidies and supportive services.

And it demands coordination among housing providers, healthcare systems, and social services that doesn't always exist.

Some critics worry that Housing First enables unhealthy behaviors by not requiring treatment participation. However, research shows that most people voluntarily engage with supportive services once housed. The stability of housing creates the conditions where recovery becomes possible, even if not immediately chosen.

Others question whether Housing First works for everyone. Evidence suggests it's most effective for chronically homeless individuals with complex needs, while other approaches might work better for people experiencing short-term homelessness due to economic circumstances.

A comprehensive homelessness strategy likely requires multiple approaches tailored to different populations.

These limitations don't undermine Housing First's value but highlight the need for thoughtful implementation alongside other housing security measures, including affordable housing development, eviction prevention, and poverty reduction.

## **Building a Comprehensive Approach**

While Housing First represents a crucial piece of the puzzle, ending homelessness requires a broader strategy that prevents people from losing housing in the first place.

Upstream prevention starts with addressing affordable housing shortages through zoning reforms, development incentives, and public investment. It includes strengthening safety net programs that help people weather financial emergencies without losing their homes. And it requires improving mental health and addiction services before crises occur.

For those already experiencing homelessness, communities need coordinated systems that quickly identify and assist people before homelessness becomes chronic. This includes outreach teams, centralized assessment processes, and diverse housing options matched to individual needs.

The most effective communities integrate Housing First with complementary approaches like rapid re-housing for families (providing short-term rental assistance and case management) and shared housing models that maximize limited resources.

## **The Path Forward**

America has the knowledge and resources to dramatically reduce homelessness. We know what works. Communities that have implemented Housing First alongside prevention measures have achieved remarkable results. The barriers we face aren't

primarily technical or financial—they're matters of political will and public understanding.

Solving homelessness requires us to see beyond stereotypes and recognize the diverse realities of people without homes. It demands that we think about long-term solutions rather than quick fixes. And it asks us to invest upfront to save both money and human potential later.

The man Janet passes each morning doesn't need to remain on the street. The families doubled up in overcrowded apartments don't need to become the next wave of shelter residents. The veteran sleeping in his car doesn't need to choose between medication and housing.

We can create communities where homelessness is rare, brief, and non-recurring. Many places are already well on their way. By learning from their successes and committing to evidence-based approaches like Housing First, we can ensure that every American has the foundation of a stable home from which to build their life.

After all, housing isn't just about having a roof overhead—it's about having the chance to participate fully in society, to contribute your gifts, and to fulfill your potential. In making that possible for everyone, we all benefit.