



INFORMATION GUIDE

HOUSING CRISIS IN SEATTLE

RESOURCES FOR JOURNALISTS

In reporting on the housing crisis, there are many factors to consider. The crisis is rooted in failed systems, including but not limited to soaring housing costs, stagnating wages, dramatic cuts to federal social welfare programs, disparities in the criminal legal system and a lack of affordable healthcare.

The information below is by no means comprehensive but provides a jumping off point and additional context for reporting on homelessness in Seattle.

Topline stats:

- In the U.S. in 2020, Washington had the fifth largest homeless population. Thirty out of 10,000 people in the state are homeless. Source: [The Seattle Times](#) and U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Seattle ranks third in the nation for homeless population by metro area. Source: [The Seattle Times](#) and [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#)
- According to the 2020 Point-in-Time Count for Seattle and King County, there were approximately 11,751 people experiencing homelessness on one night in January. This was a 5% increase compared to the previous year. Source: [Point in Time Count](#)
- The National Alliance to End Homelessness reports 22,923 people were homeless across the state on a given night in 2020. Source: [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)
- Between 2007 and 2020, Washington's unsheltered homeless population increased by 66%. Source: [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)
- Homelessness disproportionately affects people of color in the Seattle area. According to The Seattle Times, Black people represented 7% of King County's population in 2020 but made up 25% of the homeless population: Source: [The Seattle Times](#) and the [2020 Point-in-Time Counts of Individuals Experiencing Homelessness](#)

Housing affordability, availability and shelters:

- Rent prices in King County have increased 6.4% since 2019. Source: [The Washington Post](#)
- Tents in Seattle's urban center have increased by more than 50% during the COVID-19 pandemic. Source: [The Seattle Times](#)
- The need for shelter far exceeds availability in Seattle – the city currently supports around 2,300 spaces in emergency shelters, tiny home villages and tents. According to the 2022 Point in Time Count, there were 13,368 people experiencing homelessness in

Seattle and King County, and 57% of those were unsheltered. Source: [City of Seattle](#) and the [2022 Point in Time Count](#)

- According to the city's data, vacancy rates are less than one percent on average. Source: [Publicola](#)
- There is inadequate permanent housing and temporary shelter space to meet the needs of unsheltered people in many cities in Washington, including Seattle. Some shelters are only accessible to certain individuals, like those with pets, single men, single women, or families.

Criminal justice system and the Encampment Abatement Program:

- The city has effectively made it a crime to engage in the essential activities of sitting, sleeping, resting or sheltering oneself from the elements anywhere within its limits through a series of administrative rules and ordinances enforced by sweeping homeless people, threatening or arresting for criminal trespass and destroying houseless people's belongings.
- In 2018, the Seattle Police Department booked just over 1,000 homeless people into jail a combined 3,211 times. This means that one out of every five bookings that year was someone struggling with homelessness. Source: [Crosscut](#)
- The criminalization of being unhoused creates a costly revolving door that circulates individuals experiencing homelessness from the street to the criminal justice system and back.
- The Department of Justice has spoken on the ineffectiveness of the current approach: "[c]riminalizing public sleeping in cities with insufficient housing and support for homeless individuals," noting that it "does not improve public safety outcomes or reduce the factors that contribute to homelessness." Source: Department of Justice statement of interest, *Bell v. Boise*
- The City of Seattle Human Rights Commission has also called upon the city to stop their ineffective and inhumane practices: "The city's current policies only make the housing crisis worse, and are inconsistent with what is expected of a Human Rights City under Article 25 of the UDHR. What would help these individuals is simple: Affordable housing, effective social service outreach and garbage pickup." Source: [Real Change News](#)
- When people have their property taken and destroyed, particularly property that is essential to survival, they do not disappear. Rather, these actions exacerbate existing challenges of living outdoors. Deprived of their clothing, tents, and personal items, people living outdoors are more vulnerable to cold weather, illness, stress, and instability in their lives.

Additional resources:

[National Health Care for the Homeless Council](#)

[King County Regional Homelessness Authority](#)

[Seattle Human Rights Commission](#)

[National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)

[ACLU resources](#)

[Important case law regarding sweeps](#)