



California Budget
& Policy Center

5 Facts

Who is Experiencing Homelessness in California?

Tailored Housing Interventions are Needed for California's Diverse Unhoused Population

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Every Californian needs a home to access basic life-sustaining resources and ultimately have the opportunity to live a dignified and healthy life. Unfortunately, over 161,000 Californians were counted as experiencing homelessness in early 2020. These Californians were either residing in shelters or transitional housing — or considered unsheltered, residing on the street, in encampments, vehicles, or other places not meant for habitation. Over the same year, local homeless service providers made contact with over 246,000 individuals needing to find a home or search for other life-sustaining services.¹

As people of all ages and backgrounds are pushed into homelessness for a variety of complex reasons, understanding their diverse characteristics is fundamental to effectively address their housing needs. Unhoused individuals require interventions of different types and at different scales to become and stay housed. Californians who are unhoused are more than their current living situation, and state policymakers have a responsibility to support all Californians and end homelessness across the state.

5 Facts

1

Homelessness is temporary for most who experience it, but some face long-term, chronic homelessness

2

Unhoused Californians are primarily single adults, with a smaller share of families with children and unaccompanied youth

3

Racial disparities are stark within California's homeless population

4

Californians experience homelessness in every county throughout the state, with the most residing in Los Angeles County

5

California's unhoused population is aging and increasingly composed of older adults

1

Homelessness is temporary for most who experience it, but some face long-term, chronic homelessness

Most unhoused individuals experience relatively short-term homelessness (68%). But nearly a third (32%) experience chronic homelessness exacerbated by a disability. Generally, families and individuals are considered unhoused if they do not have a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence — for example, if they are living in a shelter or places not meant for habitation. Unhoused individuals are considered chronically homeless if they have a long-standing disability that significantly impedes their ability to live independently and have been unhoused continuously for a year or on at least four occasions within a three-year period. Evidence-based effective strategies, such as supportive housing that combines robust housing interventions with wrap-around supportive services, are needed to help people who are chronically homeless. As for the majority of unhoused Californians who experience short-term homelessness and have extremely low incomes, deeply affordable permanent housing is needed.

Roughly 2 in 3 Unhoused Californians Experience Short-Term Homelessness

Total Number of Unhoused Individuals in January 2020 = 161,548



Note: Individuals are considered chronically homeless if they have a long-standing disability that significantly impedes their ability to live independently and have been unhoused for a consecutive year or on at least four occasions within a three-year period.

Source: US Department of Housing and Urban Development Point-in-Time Count

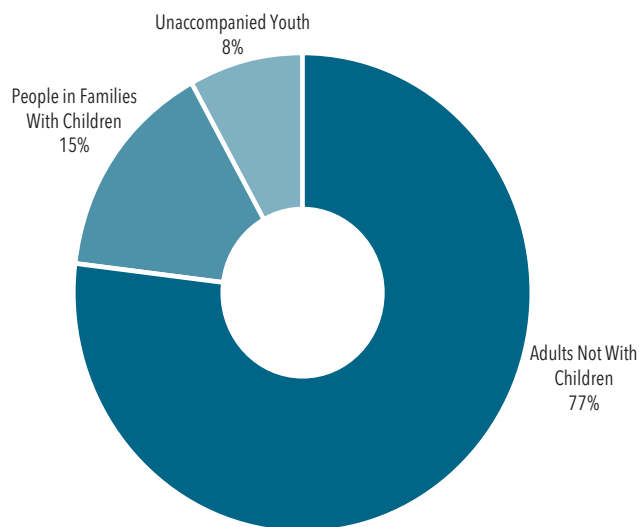
2

Unhoused Californians are primarily single adults, with a smaller share of families with children and unaccompanied youth

Adults not with children make up 77% of the people experiencing homelessness in California at a point in time, followed by families with children (15%) and unaccompanied youth (8%). Adults (aged 25 and over) in households not with children include sole individuals, couples, and groups of adults, and can include noncustodial parents.² They are particularly vulnerable to experiencing severe housing insecurity since they do not often qualify for many social safety net programs or are only eligible for short-term, small sum assistance. Unhoused families with children often fall into homelessness because of the lack of affordable housing and compounding economic challenges. Unaccompanied youth, aged 24 and younger, include youth that left home often due to neglectful or unsafe family dynamics, including many LGBTQ+ youth and some parenting youth. Experiencing homelessness at any age causes trauma and negative health, educational, and economic outcomes, and these are especially exacerbated in children and youth. Close attention should be placed on how many unhoused Californians fall into each of these three subpopulations of people experiencing homelessness — single adults, families with children, and unaccompanied youth — to appropriately build the capacity of housing and service system needs, especially for adults not with children who represent the vast majority of individuals experiencing homelessness.

Over 3 in 4 Californians Experiencing Homelessness Are Adults Not With Children

Percent of Californians Who Are Homeless by Household Type, January 2020



Note: Categories are mutually exclusive. Unaccompanied youth include people under age 25 alone or only with other people under age 25, including parenting youth and their children. People in families with children include adults and children, excluding unaccompanied youth. Adults not with children include noncustodial parents and exclude unaccompanied youth not with children.
Source: Budget Center analysis of US Housing and Urban Development Point-in-Time Count data

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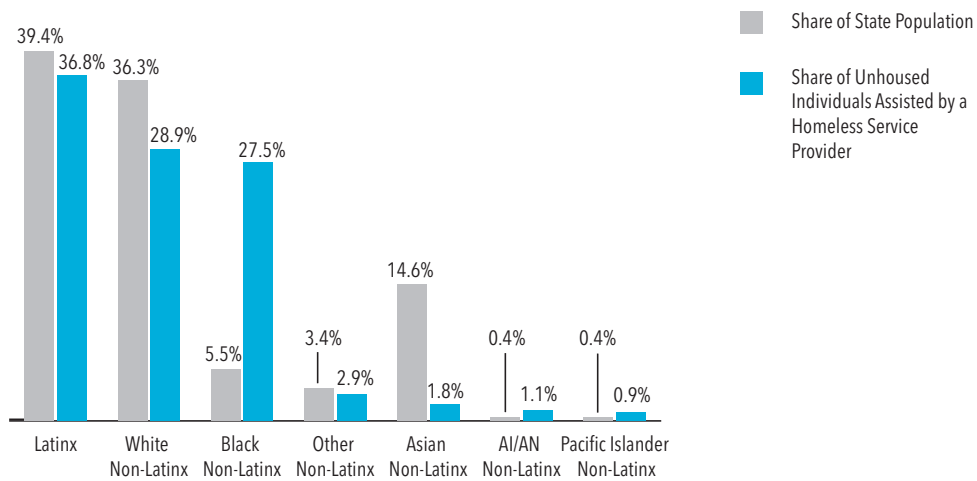
Racial disparities are stark within California’s homeless population

Black Californians are disproportionately represented in the unhoused population, as are American Indian or Alaska Native and Pacific Islander Californians. While Black non-Latinx Californians are only 5.5% of the state’s population, they comprised over 1 in 4 unhoused people who made contact with a homelessness service provider in the 2020-21 fiscal year. These racial disparities are linked to current and past racist policies that have created educational, housing, economic, and health barriers for people of color. Californians of color also face higher risk of housing instability and are more likely to pay unaffordable portions of their income towards rent.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic and economic crisis, people of color were concentrated in undervalued workplaces, increasing their economic instability. This includes being pushed into lower-paying occupations, being first to lose their jobs during economic downturns, and experiencing the highest rates of unemployment. Racist policies and practices have also placed Black and other communities of color at highest risk of justice system-involvement, which can cause and exacerbate the length of homelessness. Even a one-night stay in jail or prison can cause individuals to lose their employment and place their financial and housing security at risk.

Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, and Pacific Islander Californians Disproportionately Experience Homelessness

Percent of Unhoused Individuals Assisted by Homeless Service Providers, FY 2020-21



Note: AI/AN = American Indian or Alaska Native. Other Non-Latinx includes multi-race and individuals who did not select a category. Race/ethnicity categories are mutually exclusive. State population estimates are for the 2019 calendar year. Source: Budget Center analysis of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey public-use microdata downloaded from IPUMS-USA and custom tabulations from the California Homeless Data Integration System

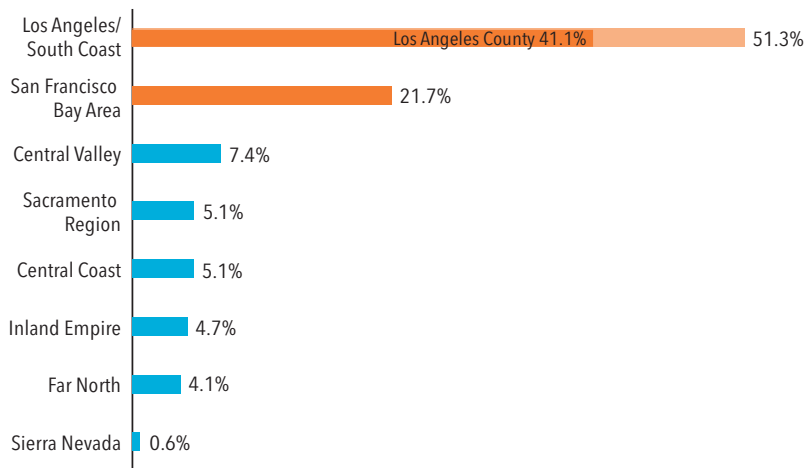
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Californians experience homelessness in every county throughout the state, with the most residing in Los Angeles County

Homelessness is a statewide problem that affects Californians in every county throughout the state — rural, suburban, and urban alike. In January 2020, the Los Angeles and South Coast region (51.3%) and the San Francisco Bay Area (21.7%) had the highest shares of unhoused individuals, followed by the Central Valley (7.4%). Los Angeles County specifically is home to more than 40% of unhoused Californians, based on point-in-time data. This is in part due to its dense population, high housing costs, and general lack of affordable housing. Understanding the geographic distribution of where people experiencing homelessness reside is needed to appropriately design the allocation of state funding in ways that account for the proportional share of the homeless population in each local area.

Most Unhoused Californians Reside in the Los Angeles and South Coast Region and the San Francisco Bay Area

Percent of Persons Experiencing Homelessness By State Region, January 2020



Note: Figures based on the 2020 Point-in-Time Count of total homeless persons by Continuum of Care.
Source: Budget Center analysis of US Department of Housing and Urban Development Point-in-Time Count data

5

California's unhoused population is aging and increasingly composed of older adults

Roughly 45% of unhoused Californians in adult-only households who came in contact with the homelessness response system in the 2020-21 fiscal year were aged 50 and older.³ Financial and medical emergencies later in life can push those who were already struggling to make ends meet into homelessness. Challenges in accessing support and social safety net programs for older adults in crisis and inadequate benefit amounts are also a driving factor. Older adults are more likely to have underlying health conditions and disabilities that may be exacerbated by the additional stressors of being unhoused. Experiencing homelessness is already tied to severe health declines as research shows unhoused adults develop similar rates of geriatric conditions as housed adults who are 20 years older. The distinctive circumstances older adults face will require more assistive services to obtain and maintain housing. Due to this, these Californians have significant implications for current homeless intervention practices as specific service needs should be integrated with other service systems and funding sources.

OLDER CALIFORNIANS ARE INCREASINGLY EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS

WHO	WHY	
 45% of unhoused Californians in adult-only households are age 50 or older	 Challenges in accessing support and social safety net programs and inadequate benefit amounts	 Older adults are more likely to have underlying health conditions and disabilities that may be exacerbated by the additional stressors of being unhoused.

The distinctive circumstances older adults face will **require more assistive services** to obtain and maintain housing.

Conclusion

Lifting all Californians out of homelessness is possible. However, this cannot be done without understanding the diverse needs and housing support required for each distinct group of Californians who are unhoused. Interventions must also focus on overrepresented Californians, including people of color and single adults who comprise the majority of the homeless population. The challenges unhoused individuals face are not theirs alone as severe shortages of affordable housing, stagnating wages, disinvestment in mental health services, and historical and current racist policies and practices that touch on every aspect of life in California further exacerbate homelessness across communities. And while recent state budgets have included significant funding for various homeless-related services and programs, there is still a need for more investments, capacity building, and tailored interventions.

Ending homelessness through effective and respectful practices has proven to be possible through evidence-based approaches supported by sufficient ongoing funding, and it fundamentally begins with housing. By understanding the needs of unhoused Californians and focusing on solutions that work, state policymakers have the opportunity to leverage our resources to ensure all Californians have access to a home.

¹ This publication utilizes two separate sources of data for our analysis: 1) US Housing and Urban Development Point-in-Time Count which provides the number of unhoused people counted on a single night in January, and 2) the California Homeless Data Integration System through which local Continuums of Care report data to the state collected by homeless service providers throughout a year. The terms homeless and unhoused are also used interchangeably.

² In the data presented here, “adults not with children” excludes young adults aged 18 to 24 who are only with other individuals under age 25 (and so are considered “unaccompanied youth”). “Adults not with children” includes a small number of young people aged 18 to 24 who are accompanied by adults aged 25 or older.

³ Data point from custom tabulations from the California Homeless Data Integration System.

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