

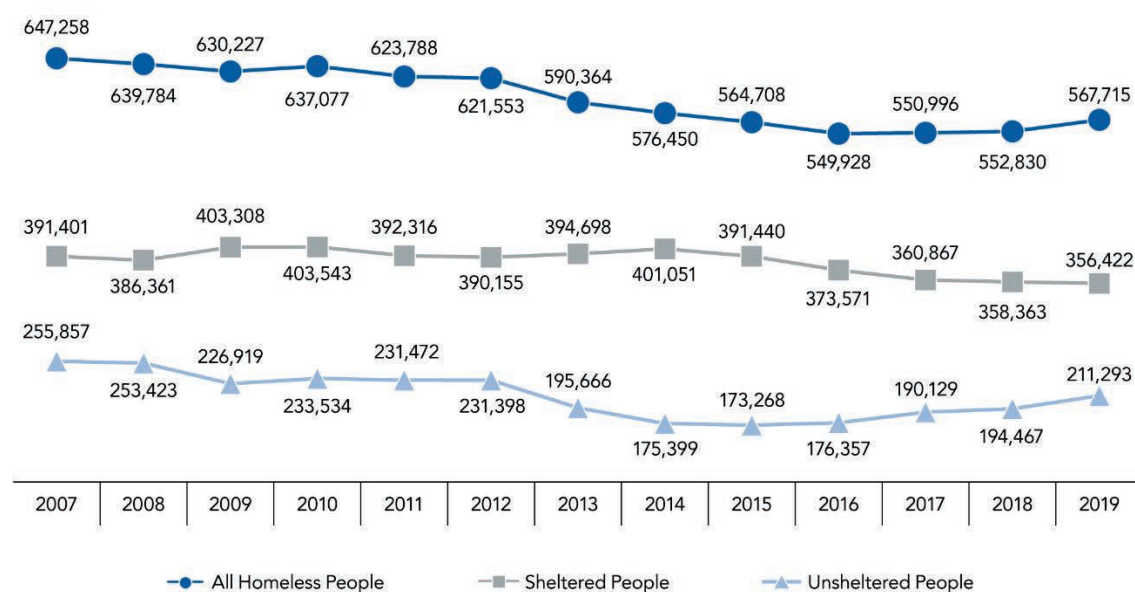
Unsheltered Homelessness and Homeless Encampments in 2019



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On a single night in January 2019, about 211,000 people across the country experienced unsheltered homelessness, meaning that they had “a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regularly sleeping accommodation for human beings, including a car, park, abandoned building, bus or train station, airport, or camping ground.”¹ Unsheltered people made up 37 percent of all people experiencing homelessness on a particular night, with the other 63 percent (356,000 people) using shelter programs created by communities as emergency responses to homelessness.²

Estimates of People Experiencing Homelessness on a Single Night in 2019



Source: The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, HUD, January 2020.

Unsheltered homelessness has increased every year since 2015 to levels not seen since the years immediately following the 2008 financial crisis, whereas sheltered homelessness either declined or stayed about the same year to year. Almost 17,000 more people were homeless in unsheltered locations in 2019 than in 2018—the largest 1-year increase since 2007.

Some of the people experiencing unsheltered homelessness are staying in encampments, sometimes known as tent cities or homeless camps. Encampments have become more visible across the United States in recent years. Encampments exist in cities, suburbs, and rural areas, and their locations can vary from city sidewalks to parks, riverbeds to tunnels, under elevated highways and along railroad tracks.

How many unsheltered homeless people are in encampments is difficult to say because, currently, no standard definition for *encampments* exists. Looking across academic literature and how cities and other

¹ HUD. 2011. HEARTH Homeless Definition Final Rule, 24 CFR 578.3.

https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/HEARTH_HomelessDefinition_FinalRule.pdf (accessed June 2020.)

² The estimates of unsheltered homelessness in this brief are from Meghan Henry et al. 2020. *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. Washington, DC: HUD. <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2019-AHAR-Part-1.pdf> (accessed June 2020.)

localities are defining the term; several common elements emerge. An encampment typically includes the following:

- A group of people sleeping outside in the same location for a sustained period.
- The presence of some type of physical structures (e.g., tents, tarps, lean-tos).
- The presence of personal belongings (e.g., coolers, bicycles, mattresses, clothes).
- The existence of social support or a sense of community for residents.

Who is experiencing unsheltered homelessness generally and in encampment settings?

Although people experience unsheltered homelessness in all types of locations, many major cities across the United States are experiencing increases in people living on the street and other unsheltered locations. In 2019, about 53 percent of the people experiencing unsheltered homelessness were living in or around the nation's 50 largest cities.³ Similarly, encampments have been forming in less heavily populated areas.

People experiencing unsheltered homelessness typically are single adults (that is, without minor children) and are more often men than women (69 percent vs. 31 percent). Most (87 percent) are older than age 24. About 8 percent are transition-age youth (18–24 years old), and some communities report the formation of encampments of younger people. About 57 percent of unsheltered homeless people are White, compared with 42 percent of people staying in sheltered locations.

The national data communities report to HUD on unsheltered homelessness do not provide separate estimates for people in encampments, so comparing their characteristics with those of people who are living unsheltered by themselves rather than in encampments is difficult. Some cities are beginning to capture information on people living in encampment settings, however, through outreach work and by entering data into their local Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS). Limited data from encampments in four cities found that most encampment residents are adult men with disabling conditions, including mental illness and substance use disorders. Anecdotal evidence suggests that people staying in encampments may have less severe mental illnesses than do those in more isolated unsheltered settings. Encampment residents usually come from the same geographic area where the encampment is located.⁴

Why is unsheltered homelessness increasing overall, and what is driving the increase in encampments?

The recent rise in unsheltered homelessness is attributed to the lack of affordable housing and housing subsidies, insufficient resources for addressing homelessness, and a lack of political will to address homelessness in certain cities.⁵ In addition to those contributors to unsheltered homelessness overall, several other factors result in people staying in encampment settings:

- The development of previously unbuilt areas or redevelopment of areas where people used to stay by themselves (e.g., abandoned buildings, along waterways).
- The shortcomings of the current shelter system, including insufficient numbers of shelter beds; restrictions that prevent partners, children, or pets from remaining together; shelter rules; concerns

³ The organizations that report data on homelessness to HUD are known as Continuums of Care. They sometimes cover a single city and sometimes a larger area, such as a county that includes the city.

⁴ L. Dunton et al., *City Approaches to Encampments and What They Cost*, Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, forthcoming 2020).

⁵ M. Shinn and J. Khadduri, *In the Midst of Plenty: Homelessness and What To Do About It*, Wiley Contemporary Social Issues Series (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2020).

about personal safety and safety of belongings; and barriers to entry, including sobriety requirements and entry fees.

- The sense of community and autonomy offered in encampments.

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