

MYTHS AND FACTS OF HOMELESSNESS IN WASHINGTON STATE

BUILDING A NEW PUBLIC NARRATIVE TO COMBAT CRIMINALIZATION AND ADVANCE REAL SOLUTIONS

How is homelessness criminalized? The criminalization of homelessness occurs when governments choose to remove visibly homeless people from shared public spaces instead of offering services. It treats life-sustaining activities like sitting, sleeping, and eating as illegal. When community leaders or others talk about ridding the streets of homeless individuals, often they are referring to those who are experiencing chronic homelessness, as they are typically the people who look most visibly poor.

Why is criminalization an ineffective response to chronic homelessness?

Criminalization feeds directly into the cycle of chronic homelessness. Individuals are arrested for minor infractions and may spend time in jail, which exacerbates behavioral health issues and results in criminal records, making securing a home and/or a job much harder. Additionally, criminalizing behaviors like sitting or lying effectively create zones of exclusion from public areas. This creates an impossibility of existence, where simply living and being may be criminalized. These policies also perpetuate existing racial disparities and have disparate impacts on other already marginalized groups including LGBTQ people, people with disabilities, and veterans.

MYTH: People choose to be homeless.

FACT: A homeless life is not a comfortable one. Homelessness is dangerous, stressful, and humiliating. Some people who are homeless choose to sleep on the streets rather than in shelters because they are unsettled by shelter conditions and noise. Very few choose the streets over a residence they could call home. Certainly, children do not choose homelessness, nor do victims of domestic violence, which is the leading cause of homelessness among women.

MYTH: People who are homeless are violent, dangerous, and/or are lawbreakers.

FACT: While a larger number of people experiencing homelessness have substance abuse disorders than the general population, a person who is homeless is no more likely to be a criminal than a housed person, with one legal exception: camping ordinances. But of course people who are homeless break that law merely by being homeless. A person who is homeless is less likely to perpetuate a violent crime than a housed person, and is in fact more likely to be the *victim* of a violent crime, especially if they are a homeless woman, teen, or child.

MYTH: People who are homeless in a community usually came from someplace else, and providing services only encourages more people who are homeless to migrate there.

FACT: It is easy to assume that a rise in visible homelessness in a community means people who are homeless are moving to the area. The truth is conditions in our own communities create and sustain homelessness. Client records from All Home (which coordinates homeless services among King County cities, nonprofits and religious institutions) show that 85–90% of people accessing services in King County became homeless in King County. While some people experiencing homelessness move around to find jobs and housing, many are unable to move because of physical or behavioral health disabilities, because of financial hardships like foreclosure or job loss that may have led to homelessness, or because they simply do not want to leave a community where they have established meaningful roots. People experiencing homelessness who *do* move to new areas do so because they are searching for work, have family nearby or for other reasons not related to services—and are worthy of support regardless.

MYTH: There are plenty of shelters and housing. People become homeless and remain homeless because they refuse to work.

FACT: The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty’s *No Safe Place* report states: “There are fewer available shelter beds than homeless people in major cities across the nation. In some places, the gap between available space and human need is significant, leaving hundreds or, in some cases, thousands of people with no choice but to struggle for survival in outdoor, public places.” In addition, the wages of low-income households continue to decline as rents rise.

In Washington, a worker must now earn at least 2 times the minimum wage to afford a 2-bedroom apartment. Even when low-wage workers can afford to pay for rent, they often cannot save enough to pay move-in costs, which traps them in time-limited transitional housing, or in outright homelessness. Landlords often demand steep deposits and tenant screening reports, while negative credit histories and eviction records bar too many from renting at all. According to the Housing Development Consortium, 21% of Seattle renter households are severely cost-burdened (paying more than 50% of their income in housing costs), and are at significant risk of becoming homeless.

MYTH: It is a waste of public resources to provide homeless services to certain people who don't "deserve" them, such as addicts.

FACT: The construct of the deserving vs. undeserving poor is harmful, and often results in homelessness, drug use and addiction being seen as crimes rather than as conditions in need of treatment. People labeled "undeserving" are in fact usually the most vulnerable among those experiencing homelessness, and most in need of housing and services to escape chronic homelessness and recover. When people have access to housing, treatment services, healthcare, and other support services, they show fast progress establishing healthy, stable lives. It is also less expensive to house a person who is homeless than the taxpayer costs associated with criminalization and emergency service use while living on the street. A Seattle study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that the yearly cost to house 95 tenants in a local permanent supportive housing program was 53% less than the yearly cost of services when that same group was homeless. In addition, the group's emergency costs declined by 73% in the two years after the program's launch.

MYTH: Government policies to end homelessness are a waste of time.

FACT: Homelessness is a systemic failure. It is caused by economic and structural conditions like lack of affordable housing, high cost of living, low-wage jobs, lack of access to health care, and mental health treatment & chemical dependency treatment services. Public policy is the leading cause of homelessness. Building more affordable housing, raising the minimum wage, and providing access to health services are just a few of the remedies that require effective public policy and adequate funding.

MYTH: There will always be homelessness. The problem is too big and too complex to solve.

FACT: It is easy to become discouraged about solving homelessness when approaches like criminalization have failed again and again, but homelessness is solvable. We simply must invest fully and consistently in the right solutions. Housing-First is a proven approach to ending chronic homelessness. It prioritizes stable housing as a person's primary need, while also providing services to address behavioral health, addiction, or other issues people may be struggling with. In this model, housing is not a reward for good behavior, it is a necessity to accessing treatment and getting better. Permanent Supportive Housing was developed in Washington state by Downtown Emergency Service Center (DESC), and it's so successful that other states and countries have adopted it, including Utah where they have successfully decreased chronic homelessness by 91%. Advocates are currently working to do the same in Washington by establishing a federally-funded Permanent Supportive Housing Services Benefit through Medicaid to pay for the services delivered in this model of housing.