Fact Sheet on Homelessness and Housing Instability in DC

The Basics

- In May 2019 the DC Council finalized the $15.5 billion FY2020 budget, the local portion of which is 8.6 billion. Only a small portion of the budget is spent on homeless services and housing programs.¹
- DC’s population surpassed 700,000 in 2018 - - the US Census Bureau states that 19% of DC’s population lives in poverty.²
- In 2016 Washington DC had the highest per capita rate of homelessness in the country, with more than 15,000 people experiencing homelessness over the course of a typical year.³
- DC’s homeless population increased by 34 percent between 2009 and 2016.⁴ According to the 2019 Point in Time count, it decreased slightly, by 5.5 percent, from 2018 to 2019.⁵

The Numbers

- The Point-in-Time (PIT) count is conducted on one night each January, and the data collected during the PIT is the basis for official statistics and demographics regarding homelessness in Washington, DC.
- The January 2019 PIT identified a total of 6,521 persons in the District as homeless, composed of 3,862 single adults, 13 unaccompanied minors, and 815 families containing 2,646 family members.⁶
- On the night of the 2019 PIT, at least 608 people were unsheltered and living on the street.⁷
- The PIT counts families who are in the shelter system, not those who are doubled up with other households because of a housing crisis. Yet 70 percent of families who sought emergency shelter or housing services during the 2018-2019 hypothermia season reported that they were staying with family or friends at the time.⁸
- The 2019 PIT only reported 1,602⁹ homeless children, but at least 5,593 D.C. school children were experiencing homelessness when they started the 2018-2019 academic year.¹⁰
- 44 percent of single adults and 13 percent of adults in families counted in the 2019 PIT are chronically homeless.¹¹
- 41 percent of homeless single adults have been formerly institutionalized – many people become homeless for the first time upon being discharged from an institution, such as a hospital or a jail.¹²
- 32 percent of adults in homeless families, and 20 percent of single adults, report a history of domestic violence.¹³
- 22 percent of single homeless adults, but only 3 percent of adults in families, have a history of chronic substance abuse.¹⁴
- 31 percent of single adults and 19 percent of adults in families suffer from severe mental illness.¹⁵
- 21 percent of single adults are living with chronic health problems, and 16 percent have a physical disability.¹⁶
• African American DC residents, despite making up 47 percent of the District’s population on the whole, comprise 87 percent of adults experiencing homelessness.\(^ {17} \)
• Median age of adults in families experiencing homelessness: 28 years old.\(^ {18} \)
• Median age of single adults experiencing homelessness: 51 years old.\(^ {19} \)

**Income Inequality in the Nation’s Capital**

• 19 percent of DC residents live below the US federal poverty guidelines, which for a family of four is only $25,750 per year.\(^ {20} \)
• As of 2017 32,000 DC children (26 percent) were living in poverty, and 49,000 children (39 percent) were living in households with a high housing cost burden.\(^ {21} \)
• In the DC metro area, Median Family Income for fiscal year 2019 is $121,300\(^ {22} \) annually. Many housing units designated as “affordable” go to people whose incomes are up to 80% of this Median Family Income, which puts the units out of reach for many working class and low-income households. People experiencing deep poverty, especially those who need family-sized units, are often left out of the equation.
• Employment is the primary source of income for 28.5 percent of single homeless adults in DC and 35.2 percent of adults in homeless families.\(^ {23} \) Even with D.C.’s minimum wage of $14.00/hour this is not enough to afford housing.\(^ {24} \)
• SSI/SSDI/Disability benefits are the primary source of income for 34.4 percent of homeless single adults.\(^ {25} \) In 2019, the monthly SSI amount is $771.\(^ {26} \) The only source of income available to disabled adults waiting to be approved for SSI is Interim Disability Assistance (IDA), which is only $370/month.
• TANF benefits are the primary source of income for 48 percent of homeless families in D.C.\(^ {27} \) The maximum benefit for a family of three is only $643 per month.\(^ {28} \)
• The maximum monthly allotment (benefit) for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Food Stamps) is $192 for a household of one, and $640 for a household of four.\(^ {29} \)
• Despite having an overall unemployment rate of 5.6 percent,\(^ {30} \) the unemployment rate for African Americans in DC is 12.9 percent - the highest African American unemployment rate in the country.\(^ {31} \) The Latinx unemployment rate in DC is 3.1 percent.\(^ {32} \)

**DC’s Emergency Shelter System**

• In DC, there is a right to shelter only during hypothermic (below 32 degrees) or hyperthermic (above 95 degrees) conditions. Although no legal right exists to shelter outside of those weather conditions, the DC government does make some year-round family shelter placements. Massachusetts and New York City are the only other jurisdictions in the United States with right-to-shelter laws.
From November 1, 2018 to March 31, 2019, **1,647 families sought shelter or housing services at the central point of intake for families experiencing a housing crisis** – a 3 percent increase from the 2018 Hypothermia season, yet only **815 families** were in the shelter system when the Point-in-Time was done.

There were only **667 emergency shelter units for families** in the DC 2018 Shelter & Housing Inventory, which means that many families were placed in motel rooms that DC contracts as overflow shelter for families.

From November 1, 2018 to March 31, 2019, **6,568 single persons** used low-barrier and severe weather shelters in DC. 23 percent of these people were women, 77 percent were men, and less than one percent identified as transgender or gender non-conforming.

DC has approximately **890** year-round emergency shelter beds for single adult men, who make up roughly 73.3 percent of the 3,862 single homeless adults identified during the 2019 Point-in-Time (approximately **2,831** men). Additional beds are only made available during hypothermia season.

DC has only approximately **322** year-round emergency shelter beds for single adult women, who make up 25.5 percent of DC's 3,862 single homeless adults (approximately **985** women). As a result, women were turned away from shelter on a regular basis during the last year because there is nowhere near enough capacity. Additional beds are only made available during hypothermia season.

There are no shelter spaces for adult couples who do not have children, or for pet owners who do not want to leave their pet behind in order to enter shelter.

### DC’s Affordable Housing Crisis

- DC had the highest rate of gentrification of any city in the country (meaning the highest percentage of gentrifying neighborhoods) between 2000 and 2013.
- 20,000 Black residents were displaced from Washington, DC between 2000 –2013.
- Between 2000 and 2012, the number of low-cost rental units in DC fell by half, and the number of lower-value homes fell by nearly three quarters. Low-cost units that remain are likely to be subsidized by either federal or local programs.
- A 2019 study found average rent for a 2-bedroom in DC to be $3,100/month, and that renters in DC need to have over $132,000 in annual earnings in order to pay 28 percent of their income or less on the average 2-bedroom apartment.
- DC has a shortage of **30,438** rental units that are affordable and available for extremely low income renters.

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This number refers to shelters receiving government funding and listed in The Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness shelter census in August 2019.

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• In stark contrast with average market rate rent in DC, Fair Market Rent (FMR) for a two-bedroom apartment in DC is only $1,665. FMR is calculated by HUD and is used to determine payment standard amounts for the Housing Choice Voucher program and other federal housing subsidies (Note that this is the federal standard. Some local housing authorities in high rent jurisdictions, such as the DC Housing Authority, adopt payment standards higher than FMR in order to make it feasible for renters to find homes in the local market).

• National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) calculates that in order to afford FMR, renters must earn $32.02 per hour (minimum wage is $14.00/hour), working fulltime for 52 weeks per year.

• To afford that same FMR 2-bedroom apartment, a minimum wage earner must work at least 91 hours per week.

• DC’s public housing stock is operated by the DC Housing Authority - the main provider of affordable housing in DC – and has decreased by 4,000 units since the 1990s to only 8,000 units, many of which are not occupied now due to poor conditions.

• DC’s public housing stock has long suffered from disinvestment and lack of adequate maintenance. At least 2,600 units are considered to be in “extremely urgent” condition due to the presence of lead and mold, as well as water damage and vermin infestations. As of summer 2019, the DC Housing Authority is planning to demolish or renovate at least 14 public housing complexes.

• The waiting list for housing resources through DCHA closed in 2013 and has not reopened. There are still 26,000 applicants waiting for public housing, and 40,000 waiting for Housing Choice Vouchers.

• As of 2019, 50,710 renter households are considered extremely low income, and there is a shortage of 30,438 rental homes affordable and available for that population.

• As of 2017, DC’s multi-family housing market had only between a 2.7 percent and 3.6 percent rental vacancy rate.

• Between 2002 and 2012, the number of low-cost rental units in D.C. dropped by more than 50 percent, while the number of more expensive units rose by more than 155 percent.


4 Id.


7 Id.


9 Id.


Id., p. 15


Id., p. 16


47 Id.
50 DC Housing Authority. District of Columbia Housing Authority 2018 Oversight and Performance Hearing, Committee on Housing and Neighborhood Revitalization, Responses to Pre-Hearing Questions. 2018
53 DC Fiscal Policy Institute, Disappearing Act: Affordable Housing in DC Vanishing Amid Sharply Rising Housing Costs, May 7, 2012