

Supporting the Unhoused and Costs of Homelessness

Shelter is a basic human need, and many consider it a human right. In 1948, the United States signed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, recognizing adequate housing as a component of the human right to an adequate standard of living. With no safe place to call home or to sleep, unhoused individuals and families are exposed to the elements, susceptible to crime, and experience significant barriers to sustaining other parts of life such as employment and education. Homelessness can take many forms, with people living on the streets, in encampments or shelters, in transitional housing programs, or doubled up with family and friends.

While homelessness is an extreme hardship and tragedy for the individual or family, there is also a significant societal cost to homelessness. The aggregate cost of emergency and other public services associated with homelessness, can amount to significant costs for local municipalities.

INVEST IN THE REAL PROBLEM: HOUSING

While necessary, many of the public costs associated with homelessness do not address the real issue, which is a need for housing and supported services. The problem of homelessness will persist if a lack of affordable housing options continues to push people onto the streets. Housing provides people with the stability they need to gain employment, manage

and improve their physical and mental health, succeed in school, and for people suffering from drug addiction, to recover. Numerous studies show that public investment in supportive and low-income housing is significantly less than the aggregate costs of homelessness. According to one study, an investment in supportive housing would save \$10,000 per person due to savings on jail, shelter, and hospital costs.¹

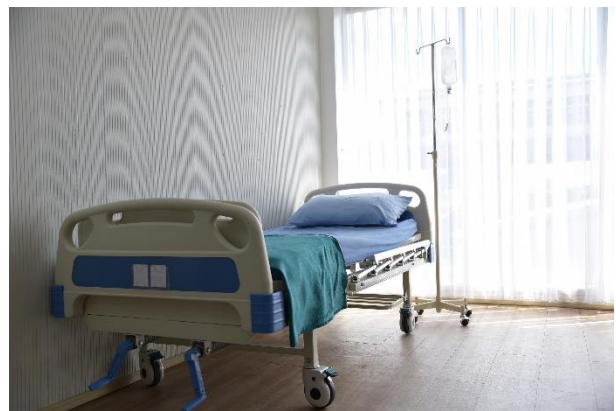


PUBLIC SERVICE COSTS

The criminalization of homelessness results in higher public costs due to the expense of social services, shelters, police, hospitals, and incarceration. The day-to-day activities of homeless people just to survive, such as sleeping and cooking in public places like parks or on streets, is often addressed as criminal activity. As a result, unhoused individuals and families are more likely to spend time in jail or prison. Half of New York adults who are homeless spend a minimum of five nights in jail each year, and annually statewide, over \$630 million is spent on jail costs for the unhoused or for people facing eviction.ⁱⁱ

HEALTHCARE AND EMERGENCY SERVICE COSTS

Unhoused individuals and families are at increased risk to an array of health challenges including communicable disease (e.g., TB, respiratory illnesses, flu, hepatitis, etc.), violence, and malnutrition. With no reliable shelter, unhoused individuals, and families are often exposed to the elements. This is particularly problematic during extreme weather events where they may suffer from hypothermia or frostbite during cold months, or heat stroke, dehydration, and sun burn during hot months.



The stress of homelessness can exacerbate existing conditions and lead to a host of physical and mental illness including heart problems, anxiety, depression, and substance abuse. Chronic health conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and asthma become worse because there is no safe place to store medications properly. Twenty to twenty-five percent of homeless people in the United States suffer from mental illness.ⁱⁱⁱ

Between a third and two thirds of unhoused Americans make one emergency department visit each year, as compared to twenty percent for the general population.^{iv} Hospitalization rates are four times higher for homeless than the U.S. average.^v One of the reasons for the high rate of emergency department use and hospitalization is a lack of routine medical care for unhoused individuals and families. In one study from New York City, researchers found unhoused people were hospitalized thirty-six percent longer than housed patients.^{vi} The cost difference for the extended hospitalization time of the unhoused ranged from \$2,414 for all types of patients to \$4,094 for psychiatric patients.

BARRIERS TO EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION

For the unhoused population, maintaining employment is very difficult or impossible. A lack of stable housing means unreliable access to sanitary facilities (e.g., shower and bathroom), an inability to prepare or store food, or to get a good night's sleep. Without meeting these basic needs, it is difficult to arrive on time, rested, and prepared to perform the duties of most jobs. Employers may be less likely to hire unhoused people due to perceived unreliability and the social stigma surrounding unhoused populations. Unhoused individuals are often unable to include a home address on a job application or use the address of a shelter, leading to additional barriers to accessing services or discrimination in the hiring process.^{vii}

For children in unhoused families, the challenges, and stress of homelessness can greatly inhibit children's mental health, confidence, and ability to succeed in school. In addition to academic impacts, disruptions to a child's education threaten their social and emotional development. For unhoused adults, a lack of stable housing can also impact academic performance and success.

Poor educational achievement has lasting costs for the individual and for society. Educational attainment is closely linked with employment later in life. Individuals who are disadvantaged because they did not have the opportunity to do well in school are more likely to be homeless, perpetuating a cycle of extreme poverty.

ⁱ Jones, Laurent., et al. "The Cost of Incarceration in New York State: How Counties Outside of New York City Can Reduce Jail Spending and Invest in Communities" Vera Institute of Justice. January 2021. [The Cost of Incarceration in New York State \(vera.org\)](https://vera.org/publications/the-cost-of-incarceration-in-new-york-state)

ⁱⁱ Jones, Laurent., et al. "The Cost of Incarceration in New York State: How Counties Outside of New York City Can Reduce Jail Spending and Invest in Communities" Vera Institute of Justice. January 2021. [The Cost of Incarceration in New York State \(vera.org\)](https://vera.org/publications/the-cost-of-incarceration-in-new-york-state)

ⁱⁱⁱ "The Complex Link Between Homelessness and Mental Health", Psychology Today. May 21, 2021. [The Complex Link Between Homelessness and Mental Health | Psychology Today](https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/2021/05/the-complex-link-between-homelessness-and-mental-health)

^{iv} Wen-Chieh, Lin et. Al. "Frequent Emergency Department Visits and Hospitalizations Among Homeless People with Medicaid: Implications for Medicaid Expansion" Am J Public Health. 2015 November; 105(Suppl 5): S716-S722. [Frequent Emergency Department Visits and Hospitalizations Among Homeless People with Medicaid: Implications for Medicaid Expansion - PMC \(nih.gov\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26111111/)

^v Wen-Chieh, Lin et. Al. "Frequent Emergency Department Visits and Hospitalizations Among Homeless People with Medicaid: Implications for Medicaid Expansion" Am J Public Health. 2015 November; 105(Suppl 5): S716-S722. [Frequent Emergency Department Visits and Hospitalizations Among Homeless People with Medicaid: Implications for Medicaid Expansion - PMC \(nih.gov\)](https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26111111/)

^{vi} Salit, Sharon A. M.A. et al. "Hospitalization Costs Associated with Homelessness in New York City" The New England Journal of Medicine, 1998; 338:1734-1740 [Hospitalization Costs Associated with Homelessness in New York City | NEJM](https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJM199805083381734)

^{vii} "Homelessness and Employment" Homelessness Policy Research Institute. 2020. [Homelessness and Employment | Homelessness Policy Research Institute](https://www.homelessnesspolicyresearchinstitute.org/homelessness-and-employment/)