



# Homelessness

October 15, 2024

Homelessness was an issue of medium importance in the 2024 Utah Priorities Project. The issue is complex and has garnered increased attention in recent years.<sup>1</sup> Despite efforts by Utah’s state and local governments and nonprofits, the problem persists, with an increase in the number of individuals without a home compared to previous years.

The Utah State Legislature acted on homelessness during the 2024 Utah Legislative Session, including \$25 million for a new 600 to 800-bed “low barrier” shelter and \$21.8 million in competitive grants for homeless service providers statewide.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the 2024 Legislature passed a bill to restructure the state homeless system’s governing body and tasked that body with creating a statewide plan to reduce homelessness and establish new accountability measures for homeless providers.<sup>3</sup> More recently, the Utah Homeless Services Board voted to focus instead on a 1,200-bed shelter.<sup>4</sup>

As part of the Utah Priorities Project survey, Utah voters suggest that a focus on services is more important than preventing camping and loitering. (See Figure 1.) In fact, most people experiencing homelessness are not camping and loitering. To understand this, it is important to understand that, broadly speaking, there are two classes of homelessness: situational homelessness and chronic homelessness.

## Understanding Situational Homelessness

Situational homelessness occurs when an individual loses their shelter due to a temporary situation, usually resolved by a change in their life circumstances.<sup>5</sup> Many Utahns do not have a strong support system, so these personal and family crises might leave them without a place to live. Factors contributing to situational homelessness include:

- Lack of affordable housing<sup>6</sup>
- Economic instability<sup>7</sup>
- Domestic violence<sup>8</sup>
- Health issues<sup>9</sup>
- Other systemic barriers<sup>10</sup>

Situational homelessness is hard to gauge because those experiencing it often do not report their status and are homeless for a shorter period compared to those experiencing chronic homelessness. However, in 2023, about 11,500 people used emergency shelters or transitional

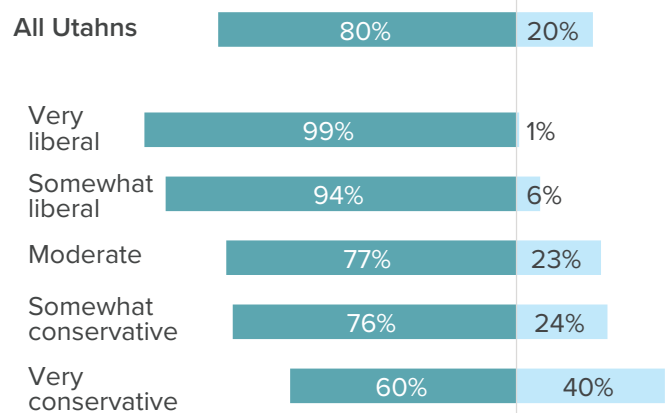
housing, with most of those individuals using one for the first time.<sup>11</sup>

## Addressing Situational Homelessness

Despite the many barriers, Utah has made serious strides to decrease the population of unhoused individuals experiencing these factors. Utah is focused on making homelessness rare, brief, and non-recurring. Utah’s new “Plan to Address Homelessness” sets in place five clear goals to address situational homelessness. These focus on increasing permanent housing options and supportive services as well as increasing coordination of services toward prevention and support.<sup>12</sup>

### Utahns overwhelmingly prefer to focus homelessness services on support rather than preventing camping or loitering.

Figure 1: Focus on Shelter and Mental Health or Preventing Camping and Loitering



Homeless efforts should focus on...  
 keeping homeless people from camping or loitering in public spaces.  
 shelter and mental health services.

Source: Utah Foundation survey.

## Understanding Chronic Homelessness

Individuals experiencing chronic homelessness have been without a home for an extended period or have had various occasions where they have not had a home. These individuals often live with mental health concerns, substance use disorders, disabilities, or a combination of these factors. These barriers frequently lead to struggles in maintaining permanent residences, despite the best efforts of various community and social outreach programs.<sup>13</sup> This situation warrants a housing concern but also a public health issue, including a decline in mental and physical health, such as HIV/AIDS, substance use disorders, alcohol use disorders, and tuberculosis.<sup>14</sup>

In 2023, approximately 1,004 individuals were experiencing chronic homelessness in Utah, representing a 96% increase from 2019.<sup>15</sup> (See Figure 2.) These individuals are perhaps the most visible of Utah's homeless population, often seen in urban parks, along urban trails, outside businesses, and in encampments.

## Addressing Chronic Homelessness

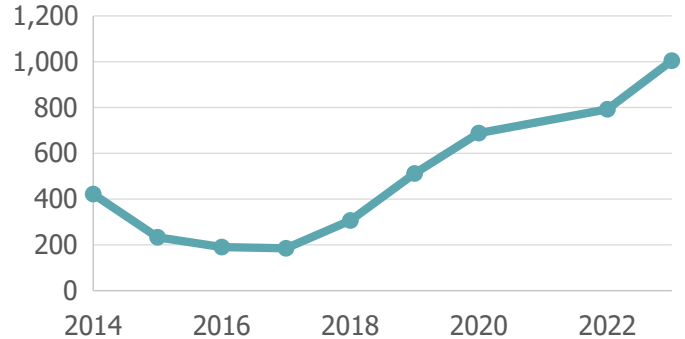
Utah has implemented numerous responses to chronic homelessness, one of which is the Housing First model. Housing First prioritizes providing permanent housing to individuals experiencing chronic homelessness without conditions such as sobriety or participation in treatment programs. Having housing is a crucial first step in addressing other challenges individuals face, such as mental health issues or substance use disorders. Housing First programs help individuals regain stability and improve their overall well-being by providing stable housing and supportive services.<sup>16</sup>

Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community stakeholders collaborate to combat chronic homelessness in other ways. These partnerships work to provide comprehensive supportive services, including mental health care, addiction treatment, job training, and case management, to help individuals transition out of homelessness and regain stability. Outreach teams and peer support programs also play a vital role in connecting individuals experiencing chronic homelessness with housing and support services.<sup>17</sup>

As part of these efforts, the state homeless coordinator and Salt Lake City have worked to fund mini shelters –

## Number of chronically homeless has doubled since 2019.

Figure 2: Chronically Homeless Individuals in Utah, 2014-2023



Source: Utah Foundation survey.

instead of tents – on a sanctioned camping ground west of downtown. Each small shelter, which spans approximately 150 square feet, resembles a pod with a partition for dual occupancy, with lockable doors, heating and cooling units, electricity, and fold-up beds and tables.<sup>18</sup> These villages offer a transitional housing solution, providing individuals with a more stable environment than traditional shelters.<sup>19</sup>

Even with these efforts, the work continues. The intertwined challenges of chronic homelessness – including mental health issues, substance abuse, and unstable housing – require continued, comprehensive, and coordinated interventions.<sup>20</sup>

## Legal and Social Perspectives

A recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling stated that the enforcement of generally applicable laws regulating camping on public property does not constitute “cruel and unusual punishment” prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.<sup>21</sup> This ruling could allow for a significant step up in the enforcement of public spaces, though it could increase risks for some unhoused Utahns.

Finally, some communities have implemented “hostile design” in public spaces to deter the use of these areas for sleeping. While this approach is controversial and has faced criticism, proponents argue that it helps maintain the intended use of these spaces – such as bus stops and park benches.<sup>22</sup>

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This research brief was written by Research Intern Melissa Nieto with assistance from other Utah Foundation staff.

## Endnotes

- 1 Henry, M., et al. "The 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress." 2020. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. <https://hud.gov>.
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- 4 Utah Homeless Service Board, October 9, 2024, <https://www.utah.gov/pmn/sitemap/notice/936323.html>.
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- 7 Utah Governor's Office "Gov. Cox Announces Agreement with Local Governments: Comprehensive Approach to Homeless Services as Key Part of FY25 Budget," 2023, <https://governor.utah.gov>
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- 22 Ibid.

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