

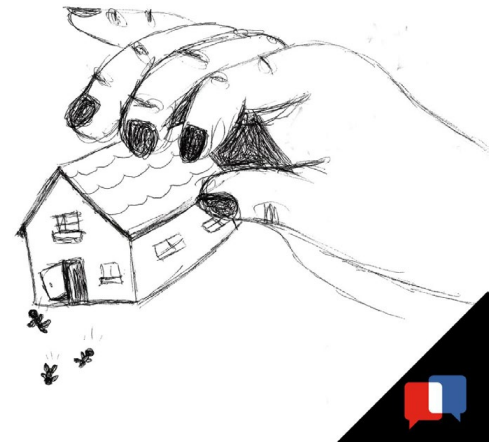
HOMELESSNESS: A NEGLECTED EPIDEMIC

PROGRAM FACT SHEET

Part of the American Public Square Civility Toolkit, APS provides a Fact Sheet for each Signature Program. This information helps ensure the discussion begins from a “common well” of information.

Alongside research conducted by APS staff, the Student Ambassadors hosting this program leveraged skills they developed in their “Think, Question and Share Like a Journalist” module to research, vet and recommend key facts about homelessness in Kansas City.

We hope you will take time to review all of the information the students and APS staff have carefully chosen for you.



HOMELESSNESS IN KC: 101

- Kansas City has the highest percentage of people experiencing chronic homelessness in the United States at 95.7%.¹
- Kansas City ranked worst for handling chronic homelessness out of all major U.S. cities.²
- The number of unsheltered individuals in Jackson County increased from 669 in 2023 to 724 in 2024, indicating a growing homelessness issue in the area.³
- Kansas City lacks sufficient low-barrier shelters, which accept individuals without prerequisites like sobriety or participation in programs. This shortage contributes to the high number of unsheltered individuals.⁴
- Kansas City's “Zero KC” plan aims to end homelessness by 2030 through strategies such as expanding low-barrier shelter options and enacting encampment strategies to address the needs of those living outdoors.⁵
- Every 3 out of 10 people that work in Jackson County have to commute in because they cannot afford to live within County limits.⁶
- Most of the jobs in Kansas are in Johnson County, and 40% of the people that work there are unable to afford the living/housing costs.^{7,8}
- The living wage in KC for one adult has doubled over the past 5 years, from \$11/h to \$22/h. ^{7,8}

THE HOUSING CONUNDRUM

- According to The National Coalition for The Homeless, nationally, the cost of rental housing greatly exceeds wages earned by low-income renter households. For example, a full-time worker needs to earn on average \$25.82 per hour to afford a modest two-bedroom rental and \$21.21 hourly to afford a one-bedroom (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2022). However, the national minimum wage is only \$7.25.⁹
- Approximately 89% of extremely low-income households in the Kansas City metro area cannot find affordable housing, leading to a shortage of 64 units for every 100 such renters.¹⁰
- The greatest housing shortages in the Kansas City region are for residents earning 30% to 50% of the area median income, equating to individuals making between \$18,060 and \$30,100 annually.¹¹
- Non-Hispanic Black households in Kansas City are more likely to experience severe housing problems, with 25.6% facing issues such as overcrowding, high housing costs, or lack of kitchen or plumbing facilities.¹²
- Advocates indicate that the primary cause of homelessness in the state of Kansas is the lack of affordable housing rather than issues like mental health, emphasizing the need for increased affordable housing stock.¹³
- The city has allocated \$6.7M through its Housing Trust Fund to create and preserve affordable housing units, aiming to address the housing needs of low-income residents.¹⁴
- Fourteen U.S. municipalities have effectively addressed homelessness using the Built for Zero model, a data-driven approach to changing how local homeless response systems work.¹⁵

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Access our Recommended Reading and Viewing List on the event web page. There, you will also find a list of all Fact Sheets citations.



HEALTH AND SAFETY FOR EVERYONE

The Toll it Takes

- Individuals experiencing homelessness are at a heightened risk of severe health issues, including chronic illnesses like high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes, lung disease, and HIV.¹⁶
- Living outdoors exposes homeless individuals to extreme weather, leading to serious health consequences such as frostbite and amputations during severe winter conditions.¹⁷
- Individuals experiencing homelessness often rely on hospital emergency departments for medical care, leading to higher costs and resource strain.

For instance, a study indicated that homeless individuals are three times more likely to use emergency departments than non-homeless individuals, often presenting with complex health issues that require extensive care.¹⁸

New Municipal Services Provide Options

- Kansas City's Municipal Court launched a Wellness Court in January to replace the previously separate mental health and drug courts. Individuals experiencing homelessness often face charges under city ordinances for issues like drug possession, theft, or property damage. The Wellness Court aims to address these interconnected challenges.¹⁹
- Kansas City has implemented plans to fund low-barrier shelters, aiming to provide accessible housing options for individuals battling mental health and addiction issues. The policy includes adding 160 beds across four shelters to accommodate those in need.²⁰
- KC has also explored establishing hygiene facilities for homeless individuals. A study recommended portable facilities to match the transient nature of the population, identifying 11 potential locations at an estimated annual cost of \$165,165.²¹

COMMUNITY IMPACT

- With many shelters closed during the day, Kansas City's public libraries have become vital daytime refuges for people experiencing homelessness, offering restrooms, internet, water, and a safe place to be. To meet these needs, several area libraries have created programs focused on the needs of unhoused patrons, connecting them to food, shelter, medical care, and other support services, while also providing basic essentials like socks and hygiene items.²²
- Kansas City's efforts to address homelessness, such as ordinances targeting housing discrimination, have faced challenges from state lawmakers, reflecting the complex interplay between local initiatives and state policies.²³
- The reliance on emergency services by individuals experiencing homelessness leads to significant public costs. For instance, in nearby Douglas County, KS, emergency services for homeless individuals cost between \$5.08M and \$5.88M in 2023, averaging over \$7,000/person.²⁴
- The visibility of homelessness can lead to social tensions, affecting the sense of safety and cohesion within neighborhoods. Recently, a proposed homeless shelter in Lenexa was rejected by the City Council. Before the Council's vote, the general public had a chance to weigh in, many of whom opposed the shelter citing concerns about housing individuals who don't have legal citizenship status, crime, cost, and the impact on municipal services.^{25, 26}

THE SUPREME COURT WEIGHS IN

- The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *City of Grants Pass, Oregon v. Johnson*, June 2024, enforcement of generally applicable laws regulating camping on public property does not constitute "cruel and unusual punishment" prohibited by the Eighth Amendment.
- The Grants Pass decision gives local governments a greater ability to enact and enforce criminal penalties for acts like public camping or sleeping — even in localities where limited local shelter space contributes to these acts.^{27, 28}

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