

POLICY NOTE

How to solve the homeless problem in Seattle

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Key Findings

1. Seattle has one of the worst homeless problems of any major city in the United States, with the number of homeless people increasing sharply over the past decade.
2. Yet, while the number of homeless people increased over the past four years, government funding to combat the crisis continued to increase without positive results.
3. When all services and activities are taken into account, the various governments of King County spend over \$1 billion per year to deal with homelessness.
4. Homelessness has multiple causes, but the underlying problem is that many people are disaffiliated and have virtually no social support system.
5. Without understanding the underlying problem, the traditional policies used to solve the homeless crisis have a very limited chance of success.
6. Other cities have successfully helped the homeless by building low-cost, barracks-style housing, as well as a zero-tolerance policy toward camping in public spaces, drug use, petty crime, and panhandling.
7. Residents of Seattle and King County have a right to walk down streets and go to parks without worrying about their safety.
8. Likewise, society has a responsibility to provide homeless individuals with alternatives that are both compassionate, but also are goal-oriented to solve the homelessness problem.

Introduction

Seattle has one of the worst homeless problems of any major city in the United States. Walk down virtually any street in the downtown core or in many neighborhood business districts, or stop at most parks in the metropolitan area and you will find people living in unconventional situations surrounded by trash, human waste, and needles.

The problem may have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is clear that the number of homeless people in Seattle has been increasing for at least the past decade. This is in spite of multiple government and private agencies ineffectively spending hundreds of millions of taxpayer and philanthropic dollars to combat the situation.

There are multiple documented causes for homelessness, although officials often find it easiest to focus only on economic issues. Local bureaucrats have tended to blame the free market and capitalistic activities as the root cause of the homeless problem, rather than the failures of their own programs. Ever rising rents, income inequality, and lack of affordable housing are often cited as the fundamental reasons for homelessness. Yet research shows that many other factors, such as mental illness, drug addiction, domestic violence, and especially disaffiliation play a predominant role in fueling the crisis.

This Policy Note reviews the actual and growing number of homeless people in the Seattle area, the various causes, what programs have been tried to solve the problem to date, and the realistic solutions that other communities have used to deal with this increasing social problem.

Background of homelessness in Seattle and King County

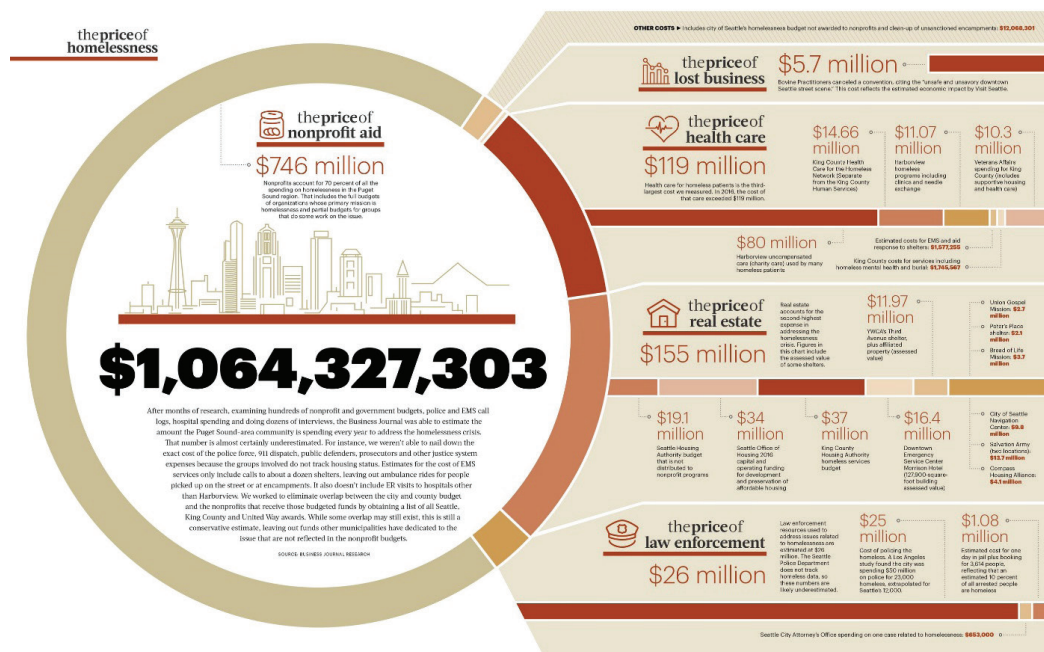
There are several ways to measure the number of homeless people in the Seattle area. The easiest method is to simply count the number of individuals and families that use homeless services over a given period of time. The second method is more labor-intensive and requires volunteers to count the number of people who are actually living on the streets on a chosen day.

The Regional Homelessness Authority is a joint Seattle/King County government organization that is charged with overseeing “policy, funding,

and services for people experiencing homelessness countywide.”¹ According to the Authority’s website, 10,258 people used public services during January-2016, with that number rising to 13,147 by January-2020. This represents a 28 percent increase in just four years. Likewise, counting individuals living on the streets and in parks at a specific point-in-time showed an increase of 10 percent during the same four-year period.

Yet, while the number of homeless people increased over the past four years, government funding to combat the crisis continued to increase without demonstrable results. Seattle’s Homelessness Response program spent \$68 million in 2017 on the crisis, \$78 million in 2018, and increased spending to \$116 million in 2020.² These funds went to a combination of outreach services, sanitary clean-up, and in 2020, to affordable housing.

While those amounts of money are staggering, they do not reflect the total cost of dealing with the homeless crisis in the area. Researchers for the *Puget Sound Business Journal* did an in-depth study of all the costs associated with the homeless population, including such things as medical treatments and law enforcement.³ The chart below shows the actual cost to be over \$1 billion per year in the King County area when all services and activities are taken into account.



1 “Regional Homeless Authority,” King County, Washington, accessed January 15, 2021, at <https://regionalhomelessssystem.org/>.

2 “Homelessness Response,” City of Seattle, accessed January 15, 2021, at <https://www.seattle.gov/homelessness>.

3 “The price of homelessness: The Seattle area spends more than \$1 billion a year on this humanitarian crisis,” by M. Stiles and C. Garnick, *Puget Sound Business Journal*, November 16, 2017, at <https://www.bizjournals.com/seattle/news/2017/11/16/price-of-homelessness-seattle-king-county-costs.html>.

Seattle city officials say they believe the causes of homelessness to include:⁴

- Mental health and addiction;
- Economic disparities and poverty;
- Lack of affordable housing;
- Racial disparities;
- The criminal justice system;
- A decentralized response to a regional crisis;
- Lack of wrap around services for youth within and exiting the foster services.

For any one homeless person, multiple social and health factors may play a role in that individual becoming homeless.

National studies show that roughly 30 percent of all homeless people suffer from mental illness.⁵ Research also shows the 38 percent of homeless individuals are alcoholics and 26 percent use some type of illegal chemical compound.⁶ Domestic violence is another factor in homelessness, with up to 50 percent of women living on the streets stating that they were abused at some point in their lives.⁷ There is a correlation between rising housing costs and rents and homelessness.⁸ However, a correlation does not mean causation and in most communities as rents rise, people move to lower-cost areas in the same vicinity.

Who is driving the debate for solving the homeless crisis?

The above list from the City of Seattle is comprehensive, but the reality is that multiple groups exist with their own beliefs and their own agendas for tackling the homeless problem. Puget Sound resident and social researcher Christopher Rufo has identified four groups that are driving the homeless debate.⁹

The first is what he calls the “socialists.” These are government officials in cities, such as Seattle and San Francisco, who believe homelessness is a direct consequence of capitalism. They see the problem in terms of exploitive businesses, greedy landlords, an insufficient minimum wage, and lack of affordable housing.

4 “Homelessness Response; The roots of the crisis,” City of Seattle, accessed January 15, 2021, at <https://www.seattle.gov/homelessness/the-roots-of-the-crisis>.

5 “250,000 mentally ill are homeless. 140,000 seriously mentally ill are homeless,” Mental Illness Policy org., at <https://mentalillnesspolicy.org/consequences/homeless-mentally-ill.html>.

6 “Homelessness and addiction,” Addiction Center, accessed January 14, 2021, at <https://www.addictioncenter.com/addiction/homelessness/>.

7 “How many homeless people are fleeing domestic violence?,” by A. Kippert, [domesticshelters.org](https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/housing/how-many-homeless-people-are-fleeing-domestic-violence), December 26, 2018, at <https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/housing/how-many-homeless-people-are-fleeing-domestic-violence>.

8 “New research quantifies the link between housing affordability and homelessness,” by J. Moses, National Alliance to End Homelessness, December 13, 2018, at <https://endhomelessness.org/new-research-quantifies-link-housing-affordability-homelessness/>.

9 “Seattle under siege,” by Christopher Rufo, *City Journal*, Autumn, 2018, at <https://www.city-journal.org/seattle-homelessness>.

The second group is composed of what Rufo calls the “compassion brigade,” identified as the “moral crusaders.” They view the homeless as individuals who have been wronged by society. This group also advocates for permissiveness and essentially enablement of homelessness. They oppose law enforcement imposed on people living on the streets, including enforcement of drug and theft crimes, and argue against abolishing the harm of living on the streets.

Rufo calls the third group the city’s “homeless-industrial complex.” These are the powerful organizations that financially benefit from the millions of dollars being spent on the problem. Many, if not most, of these organizations began with the best of intentions. However, many of them now have grown so large that chasing government contracts, seeking matching funds, and lobbying for Medicaid dollars, while sustaining their expanded payrolls, are their top priorities, not ending homelessness.

Added to this third group are the low-income housing developers. Unfortunately, it is clear that a community can not build its way out of the homeless crisis with subsidized housing. According to Rufo, New York City has been building affordable housing since 1934 and still has a waiting list of almost 300,000 families.

The last group is composed of the “addiction evangelists.” They are the hard-core addicts who advocate for relaxed drug laws, expanded illegal drug use, and the right to use drugs while living in the homeless environment. This group now commands a certain amount of respect and status among government officials.

Seattle’s and King County’s latest response to the homeless crisis

Over the years, government officials have established and funded multiple agencies to deal with the homeless problem. In 2005, with great fanfare, officials launched a public program to End Homelessness in Ten Years, an effort that clearly failed.

In 2018, the King County executive and the Seattle mayor realized the ineffective consequences of having multiple organizations trying to combat the homeless crisis in the area. They committed to forming yet another government organization, called the Regional Homelessness Authority, that would unify the area’s homeless services.¹⁰

Reading the Authority’s website, the organization has been busy with hiring and setting up meetings. Its impact on homelessness, however, has not been very effective, as seen by a casual walk down many Seattle streets or visits to many neighborhoods and to city and county parks.

The fundamental cause of homelessness

Most studies and papers that deal with homelessness use the traditional group of causes that agree with Seattle officials as listed above.

¹⁰ “About Regional Homelessness Authority,” Regional Homelessness Authority, accessed January 15, 2021, at <https://regionalthomelessnessystem.org/>.

However, in the early 1990s, two homeless activists wrote what is considered to be the definitive book on homelessness in the United States.¹¹ The authors, Alice Baum and Donald Burnes, recognized the accepted causes of homelessness, but went further by stating that it is a condition based on “personal lives out of control.” In other words, people who embrace and participate in homelessness are disaffiliated and disenfranchised from traditional social contacts.

Included in this group are obviously addicts and the mentally ill, but fundamentally they are people without a family or a social support system. In fact, the authors found that these individuals may not want a support system. Put in that perspective, the traditional policies used in attempts to solve the homeless problem may have a very limited chance of success.

What other communities have done to successfully solve the homeless problem¹²

Elected officials in other cities have been successful in getting homeless people off the streets and delivering the public housing, health, and counseling services they need.

Leaders in San Diego, in a joint public and private effort, built barracks-style shelters on government property. At a relatively low cost of \$4.5 million, the shelters could house 1,000 individuals. The city then set up bus services to transport the residents to downtown treatment facilities and jobs. The shelters initially got 700 homeless individuals off the San Diego streets.

Officials in Houston combined increasing services for the homeless with a zero-tolerance policy toward camping in public spaces, drug use, petty crime, and panhandling. Through these actions, the city was able to reduce its homeless population by 60 percent.

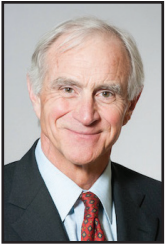
A mix of commonsense law enforcement, securing public spaces for safe use by the community, protecting victims of theft, property crimes, and domestic violence and providing public health and housing services to those who need them led to a more caring and humane response to homelessness in these cities.

Conclusion

It is often said that doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result is the definition of insanity. That could certainly be said of the policies Seattle and King County officials have adopted against homelessness. The primary responsibility of government is the safety of all citizens. This would fundamentally require enforcement of rules against illegal camping in public spaces and the crime associated with it. Law enforcement should be supported and the courts should treat even petty crime as a priority and not simply a distraction so the law is applied equally to everyone.

11 “A nation in denial: The truth about homelessness,” by A. Baum and D. Burnes, *Publishers Weekly*, at <https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-8133-8245-6>.

12 “Seattle under siege,” by Christopher Rufo, *City Journal*, Autumn, 2018, at <https://www.city-journal.org/seattle-homelessness>



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Instead of more committees and agencies, money should be used for low-cost housing to provide living alternatives for the homeless. Fully funding and staffing mental health organizations and drug treatment facilities should be priorities of government.

Residents of Seattle and King County have a right to walk down streets and go to parks without worrying about their safety. They have a right to enjoy civic life without encountering panhandling, strewn garbage, human waste, and drug paraphernalia. Minimum standards of public courtesy, safe behavior, and respect toward others should be expected of everyone.

Likewise, society has a responsibility to provide homeless individuals with alternatives that are compassionate and goal-oriented to solve the homelessness problem.