



How Communities Are Responding to Vehicular Homelessness

**Report for Congress From
U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness**

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Purpose

This report provides an overview of vehicular homelessness—the definition, drivers, data, and community responses, which include criminalization as well as services like so-called safe parking programs. It is based on several sources, such as key informant conversations with researchers, federal staff—including the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and USICH National Initiatives Team—and with community partners—including a peer-to-peer network of West Coast communities.

Background

This report is created in response to the following language in the 2022 Appropriations Act House Committee Report:

"The Committee recommends that the USICH, in consultation with HUD's Office of Special Needs Assistance Program and Office of Policy Development and Research, report on how communities are responding to the challenge of individuals who are experiencing vehicular homelessness to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations within 180 days of enactment of this Act."

Definition of Vehicular Homelessness

As housing prices continue to rise in many U.S. cities, communities are seeing an increase in visible vehicular homelessness, which refers to people residing in passenger vehicles, including cars and vans. While recreational vehicles (RVs) and campers do not meet HUD's technical criteria for vehicular homelessness, people living in them may be identified as experiencing homelessness¹ if the vehicle lacks access to utilities, is in disrepair, or is parked in non-designated locations.

For the most part, HUD considers people sleeping in vehicles to be experiencing unsheltered homelessness. But the U.S. lacks national data on the share of the unsheltered population that lives in vehicles.

Causes of Vehicular Homelessness

While no systematic national data exists, anecdotal evidence shows that there are [many different types of people](#) who stay in their vehicles, including single adults who cannot afford or secure rental housing; families with minor children; people who face personal crises like job loss or eviction; and seniors who are unable to afford rental housing. For these households, vehicle residency can temporarily provide some protection from the elements, personal safety, a place to store belongings, and a means by which to access services.

Many people [choose](#) to rely on vehicles as a form of shelter when they experience homelessness if they already have access to or are able to [purchase a vehicle](#). Inability to afford rent and displacement from natural disasters are major drivers of vehicular homelessness. [Pandemic-related social distancing](#), which resulted from either decreased shelter capacity or perceptions that emergency shelters were unsafe, may have also contributed to increases in vehicular

¹ This report is focused on individuals who live in their vehicles out of necessity because they cannot obtain or maintain safe, suitable housing. The report does not address individuals who may live in vehicles as part of a nomadic lifestyle or who live in vehicular housing that is safe and has access to utilities- including water, sewer and electricity or living in sites designated for campers, RVs, or mobile homes.

homelessness. Seasonal employment has also led some people to travel for work, which when coupled with low wages can make it difficult to pay for shorter-term housing.

For some people experiencing homelessness, shelters are not an acceptable option. They can include restrictions, such as curfews, which can make it difficult to maintain employment. Some shelters also have barriers to entry, such as sobriety requirements. Furthermore, vehicles [offer](#) more protection for personal belongings. Others may resort to living in a vehicle because it is perceived as safer than congregate shelter or because it better meets their family's needs—some, for instance, do not allow people to shelter with their pets, partners, or older children. And in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which promotes social distancing, people may feel less comfortable or safe staying with friends or family.

America's Housing Crisis

In no U.S. state can a full-time minimum-wage worker afford a modest two-bedroom, according to the National Low Income Housing Coalition. Meanwhile, rents have risen 15% over the last year; and the median rent for an available apartment rose above \$2,000 for the first time in May 2022, according to Redfin.

Data on Vehicular Homelessness

Historically, the number of people living in cars, vans, and RVs/campers [increases](#) when the affordable housing crisis worsens, as reflected by indicators like low vacancy rates, rising unemployment, and increased poverty. Regardless of the reasons, as the affordable housing crisis persists, so too will vehicular homelessness.

National Data

The primary data source for estimating U.S. homelessness is the Point-in-Time Count (PIT), which HUD publishes as an annual census of people experiencing homelessness. The data collection standards used for conducting the PIT do not require communities to identify all individuals living in a vehicle as experiencing homelessness. Thus, HUD does not collect data uniquely on this population, but it requires communities to report on people sleeping in vehicles on the night of the count and to include them with their unsheltered data.

Because Continuums of Care (CoCs) do not use consistent tools to count people living in vehicles during PIT counts, **there is no uniform national standard used by every community to capture the various forms of vehicular homelessness across the nation. This results in limited federal data on the national prevalence of vehicular homelessness.**

HUD does include people living in cars in its [official definition for literal homelessness](#). In contrast, [the agency does not believe that all people sleeping in RVs](#) should be identified as homeless in the PIT count because RVs are “ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation.” However, HUD does allow CoCs to consider several factors (outlined below) to determine whether some RV residents should be included in their unsheltered PIT data. Under HUD's guidance,

communities, when determining whether to include occupants of RVs in their unsheltered PIT count data, can consider the factors such as:

- Physical condition of the vehicle/The RV is in disrepair (e.g., holes, broken windows, flat tires, removed or broken siding).
- Access to sanitation resources/The RV occupants do not have access to sewer, water, and electricity connections.
- Location of vehicle parking/The RV is clearly occupied and parked in an unusual place, including non-RV designated lots, non-residential areas, or areas where RVs are not allowed to park.

Community Data

Although federal data on vehicular homelessness and the methodology for counting unsheltered homelessness is still emerging, some communities have taken on the task of identifying individuals living in vehicles who are homeless. In the absence of national data, this report features programmatic data from communities' safe parking programs to provide some insight into the demographics of vehicular homelessness.

Typical Features of Safe Parking Programs

Sanitation (Portable or Indoor Toilets, Handwashing, Showering, Changing Stations)

Food

Wi-Fi

Child Care/Tutoring

Documentation Services

Counseling

Financial Help for Housing and/or Vehicle Issues

Housing Placement Services

For example, in [Santa Barbara's](#) safe parking program, RVs make up roughly 20% of vehicles; adults older than 55 make up around 84% of vehicle residents; 70% are men; one-third currently work; and a small percentage grapple with substance-use disorders.

In [San Diego](#), families with children make up 20% of households; nearly half of people engaged in the safe parking program are over the age of 50; almost 70% of participants reported the current crisis as their only experience of homelessness over the past three years; and 15% of the population reported experiencing a mental health issue.

These data represent only the populations engaged in safe parking programs and may not be reflective of demographics and trends amongst populations experiencing vehicular homelessness at large.

Some communities, especially those on the West Coast, report additional data on vehicular homelessness. For example:

- In [Los Angeles](#), as of 2020, people living in vehicles make up almost half of the city’s unsheltered population experiencing homelessness.
- In [Oakland](#), as of February 2022, an estimated 1,031 people were living in cars and vans; and another 907 were sleeping in RVs—altogether representing more than half (58%) of Oakland’s unsheltered population (up from 45% in 2019).
- In [Seattle](#), in 2018, an estimated 3,372 individuals were living in vehicles on any given night. These individuals made up 28% of the City and King County’s total PIT Count population and 53% of the unsheltered population.
- In [Santa Clara County, California](#), the number of individuals staying in vehicles (cars, RVs, and vans) has increased 146% since 2015—reaching 3,655 individuals in 2019.

While West Coast cities are viewed as having the largest and most visible number of people experiencing vehicular homelessness, vehicular homelessness exists across the U.S.—from rural areas to cities and suburbs. Local circumstances—such as [housing market indicators](#), extreme weather events, and local housing policies—influence rates of unsheltered homelessness, and by extension, vehicular homelessness. For example, “[right to shelter](#)” policies—which guarantee a shelter bed to each person experiencing homelessness during times of harsh temperatures and exist in many large cities on the East Coast, such as Boston and New York City—increase shelter capacity, which may decrease the need for people to stay in cars.

Data Challenges and Implications

Service providers can more easily access and count people staying in shelters, and some communities target specific resources toward larger and more visible forms of unsheltered homelessness, such as encampments. When people experiencing vehicular homelessness escape identification, communities may not be able to effectively provide [outreach, services, or resources](#).

Furthermore, people living in vehicles may be slower to accept services because they may see their vehicle as an asset and may not identify themselves as experiencing homelessness. In fact, some benefit programs may classify vehicles as assets, effectively making certain people income-ineligible for certain services. People who live in vehicles may also forgo homelessness services and housing if they perceive these resources to be time-limited or if they could [jeopardize possession](#) of the vehicle as their current home.

Still, one study [shows](#) that the majority of people experiencing vehicular homelessness would prefer permanent housing to living in their vehicles. But increasingly tight housing markets make the availability of affordable rental housing an ongoing challenge to ending all forms of homelessness.

Community Responses to Vehicular Homelessness

The way a community responds to vehicular homelessness often depends on the type of vehicle in question, the location of the parked vehicle, and the inhabitants of the vehicle. For example, RVs and campers face greater risk of citation and community resistance because of their large size. Passenger vehicles, meanwhile, can be parked in more inconspicuous locations that draw less attention and risk of citation.

Though community responses vary, most employ a mix of strategies that criminalize living in vehicles with strategies that try to meet the immediate needs of people living in them—such as safe parking programs.

Criminalization

Many communities apply criminal penalties to sleeping in vehicles, effectively criminalizing vehicular homelessness. In extreme cases, some communities have enacted outright bans on using vehicles as shelter. Other laws prevent or restrict vehicle parking that may be used for shelter by restricting where certain types of vehicles may park and by placing time limits on parking in certain locations.

The criminalization of vehicular homelessness can exacerbate the underlying causes of homelessness and prolong episodes of housing instability. For example, emergency and non-emergency tows can further [strain](#) finances. Unpaid fines and fees can result in more fines, suspensions of driver's licenses, inability to lawfully register the vehicle, vehicle impoundment, and even jail—all of which complicate access to employment and shelter; risk the loss of possessions, medication, and important documentation (like Social Security cards); and create more barriers to housing. These laws [reinforce](#) a harmful revolving door between the homelessness and incarceration systems, which both disparately impact Black and Brown communities.

Emerging research from [Los Angeles](#) shows that vehicle-dwelling restrictions do not meaningfully change the overall population experiencing homelessness in a community—even though they can reduce the number of people living in cars in targeted enforcement areas. The study finds that communities with more restrictive ordinances have higher average median household incomes, older residents, a larger percentage of single-family detached housing units, and less industrial land use.

According to the National Homelessness Law Center's 2019 [Housing Not Handcuffs report](#):

- Of 187 cities surveyed, 50% have one or more laws restricting living in vehicles.
- Laws restricting vehicle residency increased by 213% between 2006 and 2019.
- 35% of laws restricting living in vehicles are parking regulations that make it difficult or impossible to lawfully reside in one's vehicle.

According to a [Seattle University Law study](#):

- Cities in Washington state have an average of 10 separate ordinances that criminalize vehicle residency.
- Nearly one-third (9) of surveyed cities explicitly ban vehicle residency outright without providing reasonable alternatives for people experiencing homelessness. "Reasonable alternatives" include private residence in which to perform necessary life-sustaining activities, such as shelters.

Some of these local statutes encounter sustained legal challenges. For example, in [Los Angeles](#), the 9th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals in 2014 overturned a city ordinance that bars people from living in their cars because of the "broad and cryptic" nature of the statute that penalized and promoted discrimination against people experiencing homelessness. In response to this ruling, some municipalities altered ordinances to focus on restricting the time and place of vehicles parking in specific areas.

Safe Parking Programs

A growing number of communities use safe parking programs to provide a safe, fixed location for people to park vehicles overnight in locally sanctioned spaces. These sites remove the risk of citation and fines associated with illegal parking,

provide safety and security, increase connections to services, decrease interactions with law enforcement, and build community and trust.

One of the earliest known safe parking programs was in [Santa Barbara in 2004](#). Today, an estimated 30 programs exist—primarily across California and Washington state, with a few in Colorado, Minnesota, and Oregon. ([See the appendix for a list of these programs.](#))

The design of safe parking programs varies. They use a mix of city, county, state, nonprofit, faith-based, and private funding to offer [resources](#) like basic hygiene and connections to mainstream and housing resources. Programs also differ in the intended populations served (e.g., older Americans or families with children), restrictions for entrance (e.g., allowable vehicle type, background checks), level of on-site staffing (e.g., security and supportive services staff), physical capacity (number of spaces offered), and hours of operation (e.g., overnight only, 24/7).

Depending on the level of a safe parking program’s staffing, services, and spaces, communities often face high costs and, in [some cases](#), public opposition to operating and scaling these programs. For example, costs and community resistance caused a California state lawmaker to pull a bill in 2020 that would have required college campuses with on-campus parking facilities to grant overnight access to homeless students who take classes, pay tuition, and are in good standing with the school.

Safe Parking Does Not Eliminate Criminalization

Some communities with safe parking programs enforce criminalization laws. For example, [San Diego](#) passed an ordinance barring people from sleeping in their vehicles overnight and anytime near homes or schools, while concurrently voting to provide lots for people to park and sleep in overnight. Mountain View, California, pairs a safe parking program with [restrictions on oversized vehicle parking](#).

In designating certain areas as “safe” places to park, some communities implicitly or explicitly designate most other areas within community limits as illegal to reside in. In these environments, safe parking programs can function similar to sanctioned encampments in that they can exist in larger legal ecosystems that may include criminalization laws at the local or state level. In these environments, safe parking programs can represent the “carrot” which accompanies the “stick” of criminalization.

Emerging Lessons and Strategies to Address Vehicular Homelessness

In addition to creating safe parking program sites, communities continue to [learn more](#) about emerging practices for [providing services](#) to individuals experiencing vehicular homelessness, such as:

- Lowering barriers to program and housing entry can increase engagement for people living in vehicles who may not wish to give up their autonomy.
- Broad engagement of community stakeholders and citizens—including local business owners, local government, law enforcement, faith-based communities, and nonprofits—can provide the political and public will to create new services and sites.

- Administrative improvements—like providing flexible dollars, sharing data, providing outreach assessments and connections to the coordinated entry and HMIS systems, and blending funding sources—can scale supports needed to address vehicular homelessness.
- Creative services—like [free mobile pump-out services for RVs](#) to avoid leaking and dumping on city streets and on-site mechanics at safe parking lots—can reduce the risk of citation and meet the needs of vehicle residents and local communities.

Conclusion

As vehicular homelessness continues to attract public attention, additional data (at the community and national levels) and community-driven initiatives will help shape a greater collective understanding of the various demographics, preferences, and needs of vehicular residents to further hone the development of effective and equitable strategies to help them transition to permanent housing. As part of the implementation of the forthcoming Federal Strategic Plan to Prevent and End Homelessness (FSP), USICH will continue to explore strategies to address vehicular homelessness with federal partners.

In the meantime, communities should continue to explore other alternatives to criminalization and pathways to permanent housing through specialized outreach, adapted forms of shelter, such as non-congregate rooms, and safe parking program sites.

Housing and services solve homelessness, and communities must partner with people living in vehicles to tailor outreach, services, and housing to their experiences and needs.

Appendix

The first official safe parking program was launched in Santa Barbara in 2004. Examples of such programs include:

- **California:**
 - [Alameda County](#)
 - [Berkeley](#)
 - [East Palo Alto](#)
 - [Long Beach](#)
 - [Los Angeles](#)
 - [Monterey](#)
 - [Oakland](#)
 - [Encinitas](#)
 - [Mountain View](#)
 - [Sacramento](#)
 - [San Diego](#)
 - [San Francisco](#)
 - [San Jose](#)
 - [San Luis Obispo](#)
 - [Santa Barbara](#)
 - [Santa Cruz](#)
 - [Santa Rosa](#)
 - [Sebastopol](#)
 - [Union City](#)
 - [Ventura](#)
 - [Walnut Creek](#)
- **Colorado:**
 - [Denver](#)
- **Minnesota:**
 - [St. Paul, MN](#)
- **Oregon:**
 - [Beaverton, OR](#)
 - [Bend, OR](#)
 - [Salem, OR](#)
- **Washington State:**
 - [Everett](#)
 - [Kirkland](#)
 - [Redmond](#)
 - [Seattle](#)
 - [Tacoma](#)
 - [Vancouver](#)

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