



# 2025 POINT-IN-TIME COUNT

## Homelessness in Spokane: The Broader Context

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# Introduction

The Point-in-Time (PIT) Count is conducted annually in municipalities and counties across the United States in which a “Continuum of Care” (CoC) has been established. A CoC is designed to be a collaborative governing body for the homelessness management system in a given local jurisdiction or region. To receive federal funding for homeless management services and projects, including emergency shelters, rapid re-housing, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, and other social services, a community must establish a CoC, as a requirement of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

The Spokane Regional CoC functions as the regional governing body on homelessness for Spokane County and is comprised of representatives of all the relevant stakeholders, including the Cities of Spokane and Spokane Valley, Spokane County, the Spokane Housing Authority, as well as homeless service providers, local businesses, the education sector, the health care community, people with lived experience, and more. The CoC is also committed to serving all unhoused people who enter the system, regardless of the specific combination of circumstances that caused their homelessness. The PIT Count entails a major community effort each year that requires key partnerships with regional government agencies, organizations, and volunteers.

The purpose of the PIT Count is to give a snapshot of the unhoused population. The data is used for grant applications and regional homeless planning efforts and is one of several elements in the national effort to move people into permanent housing. Caveats to the PIT data are that the total counts are invariably an undercount, and do not include people who are couch surfing or unstably housed as it utilizes a specific definition of homelessness outlined by HUD. The Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), managed by the City of Spokane on behalf of the CoC, contains a much fuller database of everyone who has entered Spokane’s homelessness response system throughout the year (sheltered or unsheltered). The PIT Count includes data gathered from surveys administered by volunteers to both the sheltered and unsheltered homeless population on the night of the count (including those who may not have entered the HMIS system). However, despite the above caveats and limitations, the PIT Count does give us a sense of how things are changing over time, whether the total number is increasing or decreasing, or whether we are seeing notable changes or trends within certain subpopulations.

In January 2025, 230 volunteers canvassed the county with an emphasis on the known hot spots and clusters, informed by street outreach teams. Presented below is an analysis of this data that was conducted by staff in the City of Spokane’s Department of Community, Human, and Health Services and a team of faculty and students from Eastern Washington University, Whitworth University, and Washington State University, and IntelliTect.

PIT data includes age, gender, race, longevity of homelessness, disabling conditions, area of residence before becoming homeless and other information. As such, it offers a snapshot of who

makes up the local homeless population specifically on the night(s) of the count. Names are kept confidential. Detailed statistics have already been published in the annual PIT report submitted by the City of Spokane to HUD. This report can be found [here](#).

Rather than duplicating this report, the purpose of this effort is to contextualize the PIT data within broader demographic, housing, and health-related data for the Spokane region. We put the PIT data into dialogue with wider datasets and scholarship related to the nexus of forces that have produced homelessness in Spokane and beyond in recent years. In the process, the report takes aim at combating two of the more prominent myths related to the causes of homelessness. Illuminated are the ways in which housing market dynamics can explain both the dramatic rise in homelessness observed in Spokane from 2015-2023 and the more recent decline in the total number of unhoused people counted during the PIT in 2024 and, again, in 2025. In short, this is the story behind the numbers.

# The Overarching Trends

## Total Homeless Count in Spokane, 2019-2025

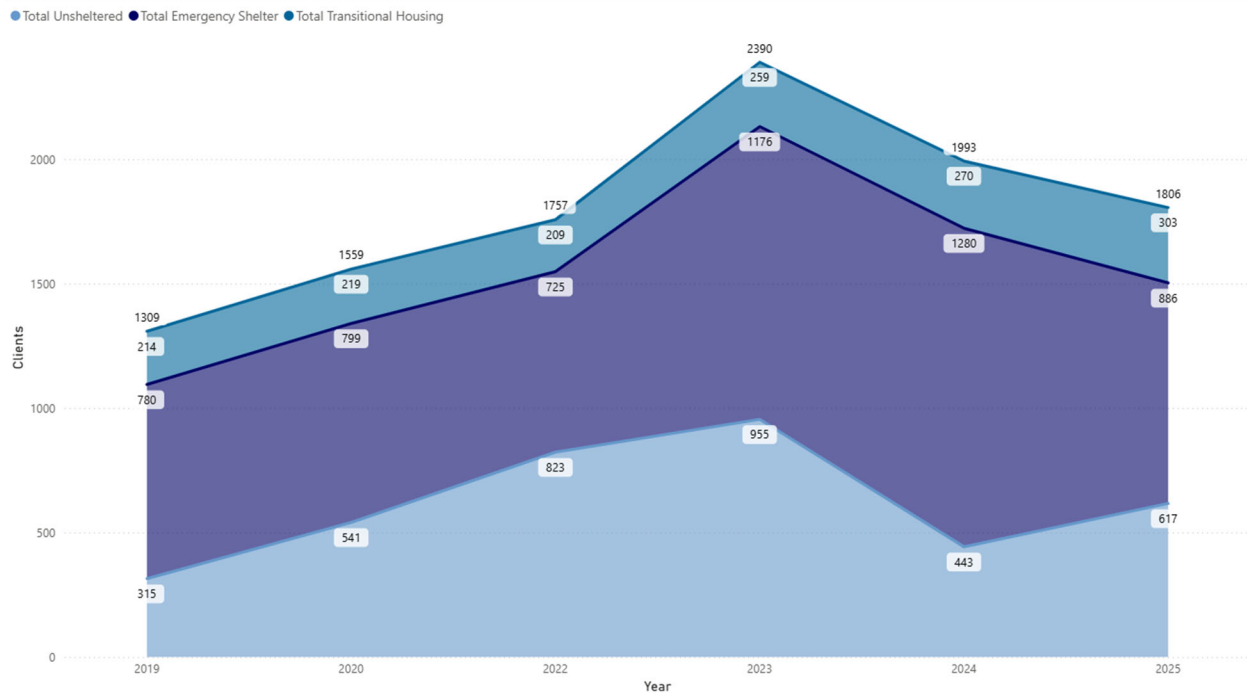


Figure 1: Total Homeless Count, 2019-2025. Graph created by City of Spokane HMIS Team

Homelessness in Spokane increased steadily from 2015 to 2023. Particularly striking and visible has been the spike in the number of unsheltered homeless people during this time span, rising from 138 in 2017 to a high of 955 in 2023 (*Note: there was no unsheltered count in 2021 due to COVID*). Since 2023, however, the total number of unhoused people counted in the PIT has declined, from a high of 2390 counted in 2023, to 1993 in 2024, and 1806 in 2025.

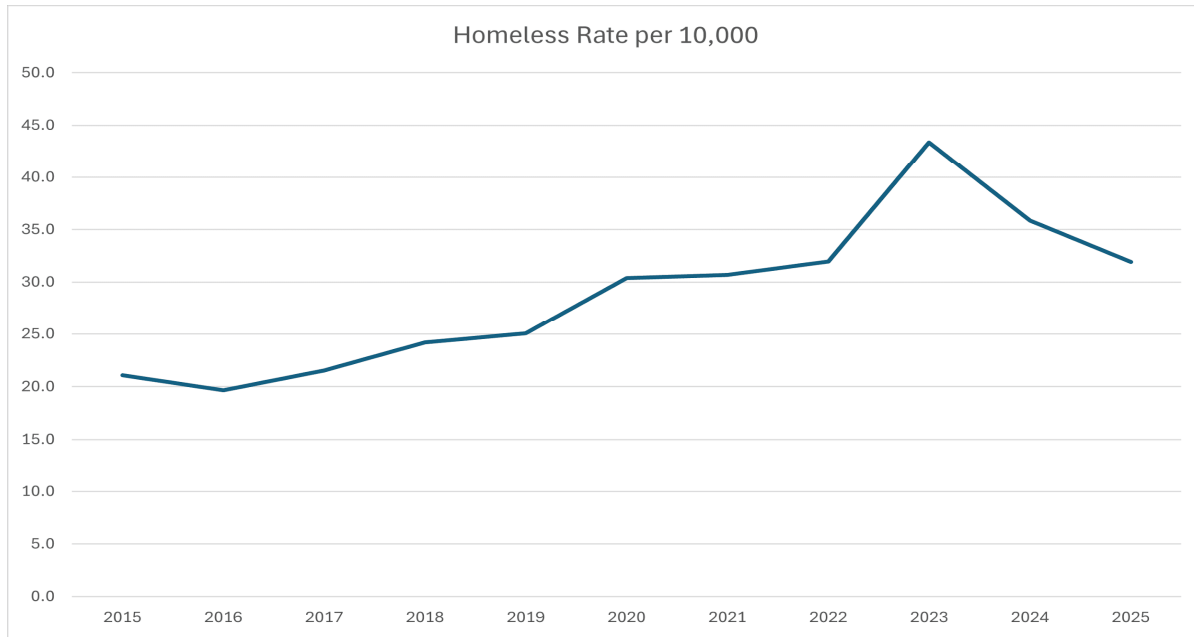


Figure 2: The rate of homelessness in Spokane County, 2015-2025. Graph created by Kenneth Moore, Urban Planning Graduate Student, Eastern Washington University; Data source, 2025 PIT Count, US Census Bureau. Since there was no unsheltered count for 2021, the value of 683 was estimated (falling halfway between 2020 and 2022) rather than being left at 0.

The rate of homelessness in Spokane County, calculated as the total homeless count divided by the total population in the county, has also declined since 2023, returning to a level comparable to 2022. Figure 2 is to be interpreted as the number of unhoused people for every 10,000 people in Spokane County.

In 2025, of the 590 unsheltered people who answered the question related to length of homelessness, over 315 (53%) survey respondents reported having been homeless for 3 years or longer. Over 157 (27%) reported having been homeless between 1 and 3 years, and 124 (21%) became homeless within the past year. It should be noted that within the past three years, the COVID-era moratorium on evictions and renter protections ended, which led to a surge in evictions filed with the Spokane County Clerk's Office.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> A list of evictions was obtained from the Spokane County Clerk's Office which included evictions filed with Spokane County from 2018-2024. Around 2600 evictions were counted from 2018-2022, while over 3500 were counted from 2022-2024.

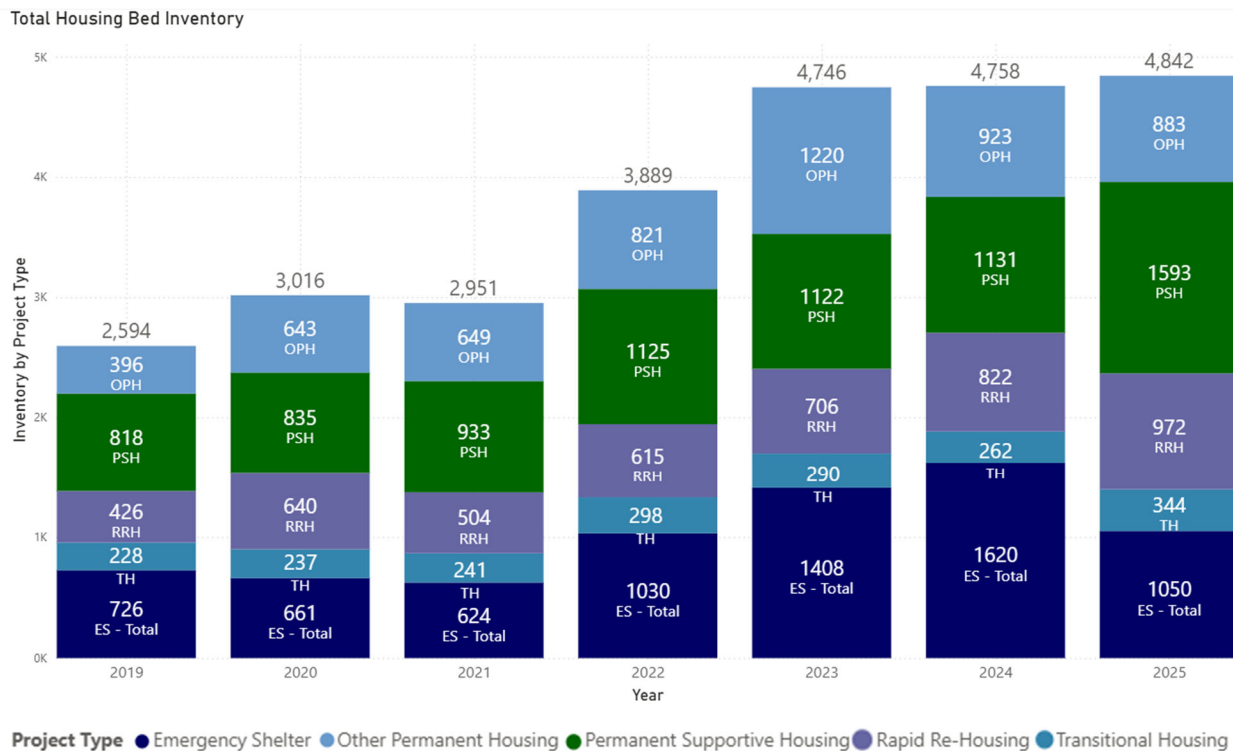


Figure 3: Housing Inventory Count (HIC) trends, 2019-2025. Graph created by HMIS Team, City of Spokane; data source, 2025 PIT. As the numbers of unhoused people have increased, the number of available beds has also increased, calculated as the total number of beds in HMIS, including Emergency Shelters (ES), Transitional Housing (TH), Rapid Rehousing (RRH), Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH), and Other Permanent Housing (OPH).

Figure 3 shows the breakdown of beds available for unhoused people in Spokane going back to 2019. There are more beds in Spokane in 2025 than in previous years, although the breakdown has evolved in recent years to include fewer ES beds and more PSH beds. The unsheltered count dropped in 2024 prior to the PIT count when the Trent Resource and Assistance Center (TRAC) shelter opened. It is important to note, however, that while the TRAC shelter has since closed, there has been a corresponding increase in other units that has exceeded the number of lost shelter beds.

Of the 617 unsheltered people who were counted, 304 (49%) reported sleeping on the street. 129 (21%) were sleeping in an RV, vehicle, or boat, and 105 (17%) were sleeping in an encampment. Other locations were significantly lower. A potentially major caveat is the undercount of people sleeping in vehicles, as many of these individuals are actively trying to avoid being detected. It is worth noting that vehicular homelessness is on the rise, as is the proportion of these people who are employed but cannot afford to live anywhere within commuting distance to where they work.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Zickefoose, G. (2023). Toward a geography of vehicular homelessness: A mixed methods approach. Unpublished MURP thesis, Urban and Regional Planning, Department of Political Science & Public Policy, Eastern Washington University.

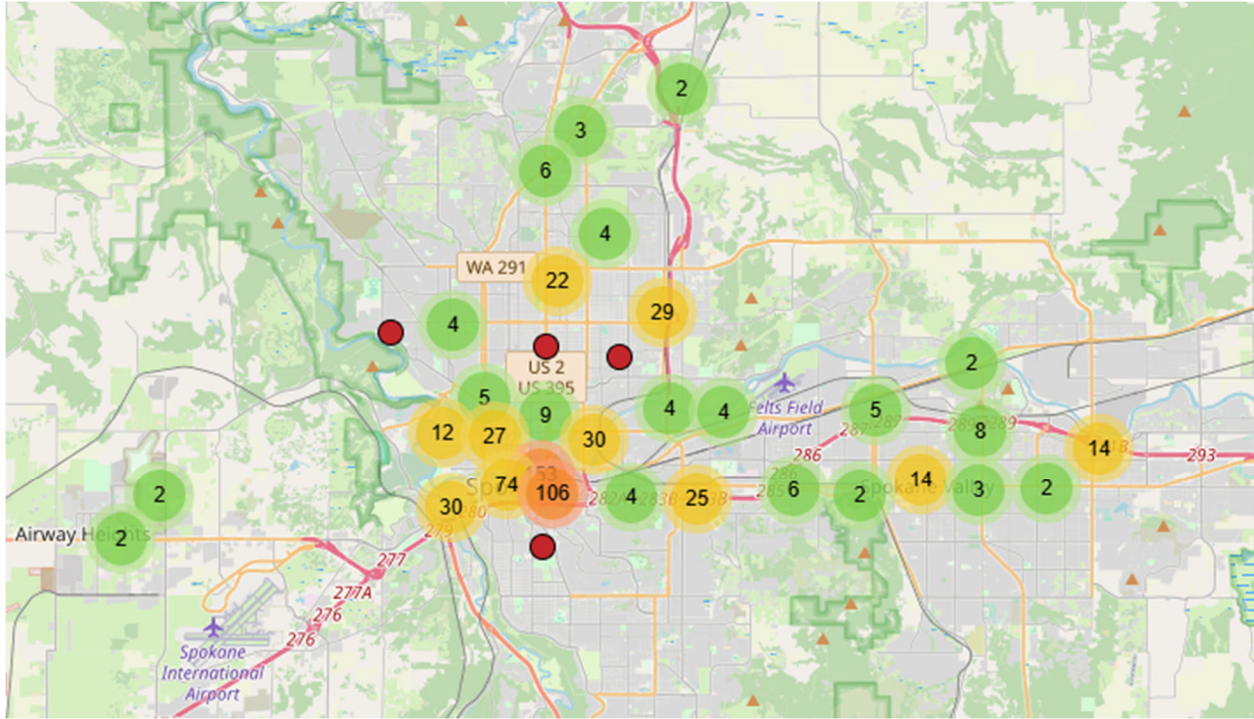


Figure 4: Distribution of where surveys of unhoused people took place during the 2025 PIT count. Map created by HMIS Team, City of Spokane

As in previous years, the biggest cluster of those experiencing unsheltered homelessness were counted in the immediate downtown core. Indeed, many of the shelter facilities are located here, contributing to this phenomenon, as shown in Figure 4. It should also be noted that PIT volunteers were stationed at the Spokane Convention Center as a congregation point, which further concentrated respondents in the downtown core. 22% of unsheltered respondents were surveyed at the convention center ( $n=140$ ). With that said, compared with previous PIT count data, a subtle decentralization trend can be observed, whereby a greater proportion of people counted were located outside the immediate downtown core. In fact, only 35% of unsheltered respondents were surveyed in the downtown core.

As such, the decentralization of homelessness in Spokane demonstrated by the PIT data prevents us from establishing norms and trends based only on visible homelessness in the downtown core. When responding to the homelessness crisis, visibility represents only a fraction of the unhoused community and fails to account for the needs and experiences of those living outside the hyper-visible downtown core. Because of this, visibility can perpetuate skewed perceptions of homelessness and support the reproduction of entrenched myths about the homeless population. We discuss these myths in the following section.

# Myth Busting

## Myth #1: They're all coming from somewhere else.

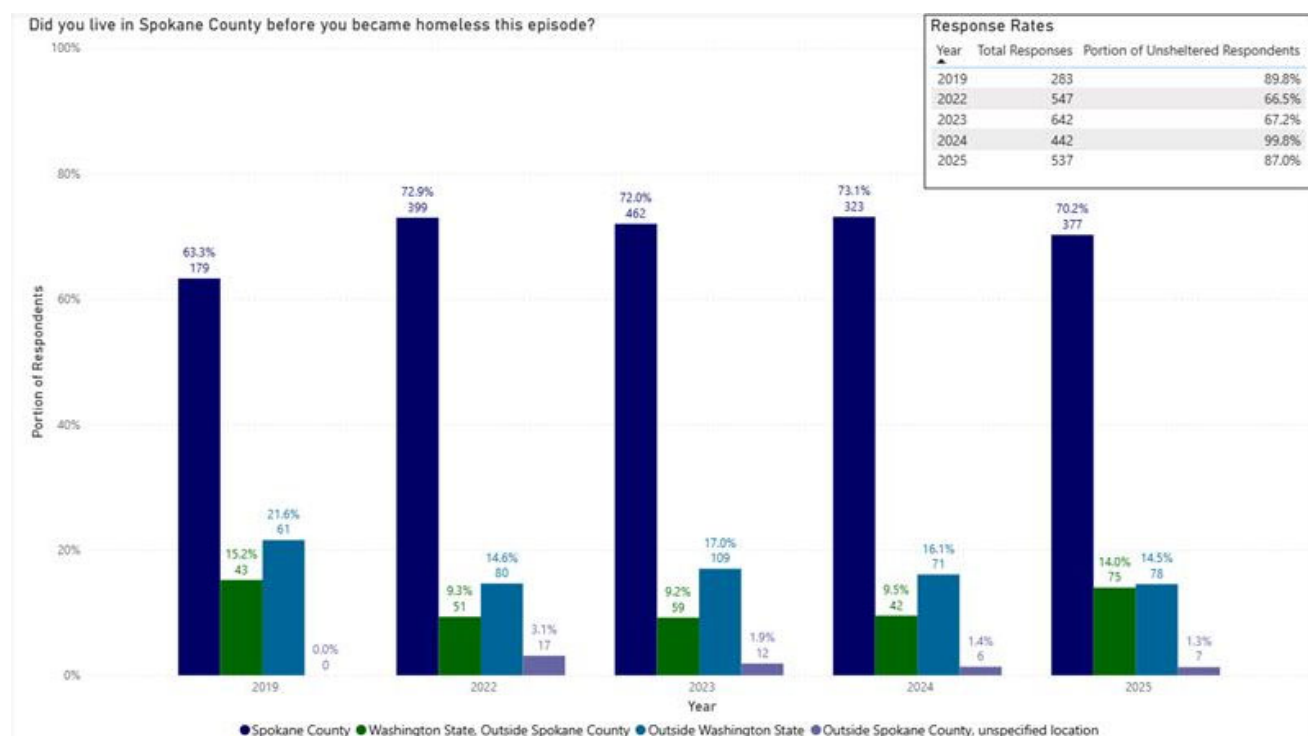


Figure 5: Where survey respondents were previously living before they became unhoused. Graph created by HMIS Team, City of Spokane

A prevalent and persistent myth is that most unhoused people in Spokane have migrated here from somewhere else. Based on Figure 5, this is simply not true. A significant majority of the unsheltered population were living in Spokane County before experiencing homelessness. This finding is broadly consistent with what past PIT data has revealed, going back to 2019. This finding is also strikingly consistent across CoCs in the United States and historically. Most people experience homelessness in the same place where they were previously housed. There is no rigorously obtained evidence or lasting trend in any geographic area of the US demonstrating a higher number of homeless “transplants” than longtime residents.<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, a regression analysis of the unsheltered PIT data conducted by Mark Killian (Whitworth University) found that there was *no statistically significant difference* between respondents surveyed in the downtown core and those surveyed from outside the downtown core related to where respondent were living before experiencing homelessness. However, when not including the respondents surveyed at the convention center, the percent of respondents surveyed in the downtown core who were living outside of Washington State was notably higher, at 32%.

<sup>3</sup> Colburn, G., and Aldern, C. (2022). *Homelessness is a housing problem: How structural factors explain U.S. patterns*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

As such, one cannot make generalizations about the total unhoused population in Spokane based entirely off the characteristics of the unsheltered population in the downtown core, which this analysis reveals to be somewhat skewed.

For the first time in 2025, the Spokane PIT surveyed respondents who reported being doubled up on the night of the count (e.g., couch surfing with a family member or friend), 163 in total. These findings are not included in the final report to HUD because of their exclusion from HUD's definition of homelessness; however, we opted to include this at-risk population in our local count to broaden our understanding of the crisis at a local level. People who reported couch surfing were even more likely to have been previously living in Spokane County before they lost their primary form of shelter. This finding is unsurprising as people who previously were living in Spokane County are more likely to have stronger local networks of family and friends to provide support and resources during times of need.

## Myth #2: They all have substance use and/or mental health disorders.

According to PIT data for Spokane County, the percentage of the total unhoused population with mental health or substance use disorders has ranged between 20-52% from 2019 to 2025, consistently accounting for a minority of the homeless population. This finding is consistent across CoCs in the US historically. While an outsized proportion of unhoused people have mental illnesses and/or substance use disorders in comparison to the general population, it is important to stress that many unhoused people have neither.

However, comparisons with previous years does reveal some notable changes. First, rates of substance use disorders and mental illnesses have increased since 2019, even if generally remaining in the minority. The percentage of the total unsheltered population that reported substance use disorders hovered around 20% until 2024, when it increased to 33%. For 2025, this figure increased to 40.9% (684 people). The percentage of the total unhoused population with a mental illness was 24% in 2019, increasing to 34% (2020), dropping to 28% (2022) and 21% (2023) and then increasing to 44% and 52% (877 people) in 2024 and 2025, respectively.

A related myth is that most of the unhoused people who resist going to shelters do so in order to remain on the street to do drugs. Past PIT data, consistent with existing scholarship, has shown that the most prevalent reasons for why some people resist shelters are anxiety, fear of theft, fear of violence, rules against pets, etc. Substance use is a reported reason, but it is usually never at the top of the list.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, D. (2011). Homelessness, American style. *Urban Geography*, 32(7): 933-56.

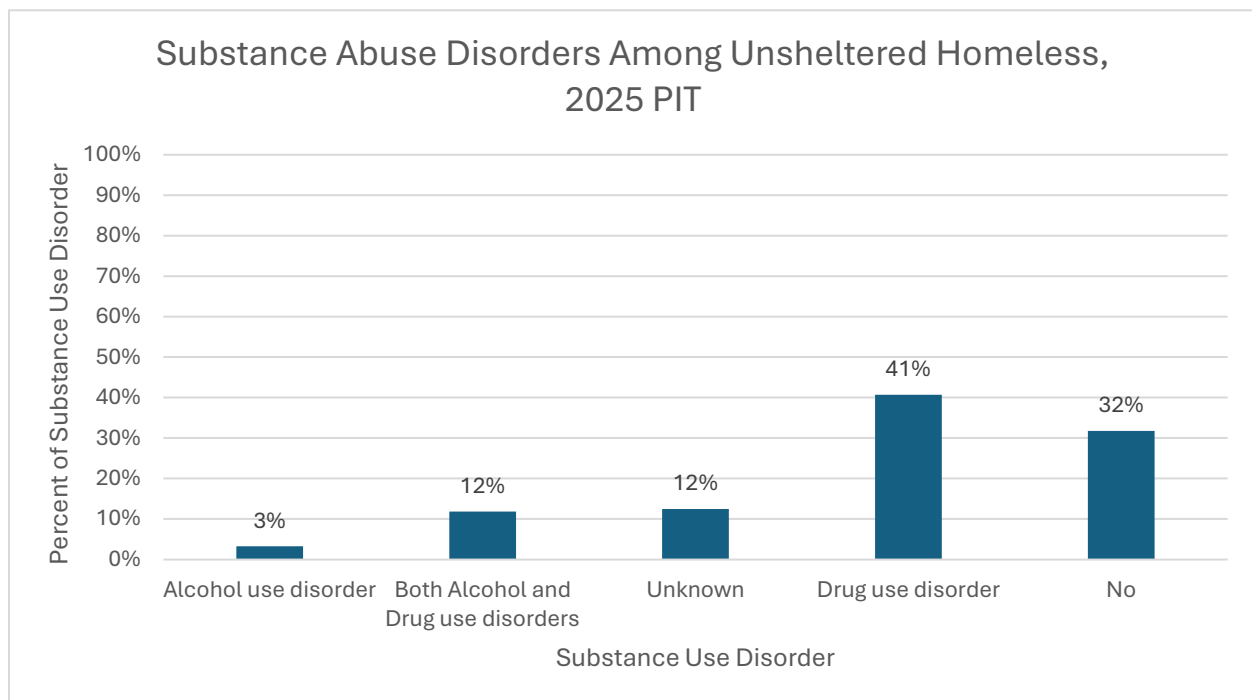


Figure 6: Substance use disorders among the unsheltered homeless population, 2025. Graph created by Dr. Matthew Anderson, Eastern Washington University

A strength of the PIT Count is that it extends our knowledge of the unhoused population *beyond what we can see with our own eyes*. Each of us likely has a degree of experience with homelessness based on what we have personally observed. However, each of our experiences is skewed insofar as they are based on what is visible as we move through our daily routines. PIT data reveals that many unhoused people do not suffer from either substance use disorders or mental illnesses, yet visible symptoms of each can skew perception. Media coverage relies heavily on visibility to demonstrate need or concern and this visibility is often mischaracterized as inherently linked to an illness. We often characterize visibility of homelessness (i.e., hygiene, torn or missing clothing, carts or baggage) as symptoms of mental illnesses or substance use disorders when they are merely byproducts of living on the streets. Many unhoused people are also able to evade visible detection, leading one to wrongly presume that what we see constitutes the entirety of the phenomenon.<sup>5</sup>

Our statistical analysis of the 2025 PIT data also examined the prevalence of substance use and mental health disorders for just respondents surveyed in the downtown core. One common assumption is that the numbers would be magnified for the downtown core, but our analysis reveals that there was *no statistically significant difference* between those reporting a serious mental health condition or chronic health conditions in general in the downtown core or outside

<sup>5</sup> Langegger S and Koester S (2017) Invisible homelessness: Anonymity, exposure, and the right to the city. *Urban Geography*, 37(7): 1030–1048.

of the downtown core. This same result holds if we omit the convention center respondents from the analysis.

However, the analysis revealed that respondents surveyed in the downtown core were *30% less likely* to report a substance use disorder than those surveyed outside of the downtown core (p-value = .048), which runs counter to common assumptions about the unsheltered population downtown. Moreover, those surveyed at the convention center were 39% less likely to report a substance use disorder than those surveyed outside of the downtown core (p-value = .016).

As the unhoused population may be mobile from day to day, or month to month, a PIT count conducted on another day may yield notably different results about where certain subpopulations may or may not be located. Insofar as this is true, the act of making generalizations about the total unhoused population based on the characteristics of *any* subpopulation (and where they are counted) is almost certainly bound to be inaccurate.

Related to this myth is the common assumption that substance use and mental health disorders are what cause one to experience homelessness, but this is not necessarily true either. Many studies have found that among unhoused people with substance use disorders and mental illnesses, many develop these conditions *after* becoming homeless.<sup>6</sup> The experience of being homeless is traumatic and can tax people's coping mechanisms. Drug use can also help people stay awake at night as a safety precaution.

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<sup>6</sup> Colliver, V. (2025). How common is illegal drug use among people who are homeless? University of California, San Francisco, Research: <https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2025/02/429486/how-common-illegal-drug-use-among-people-who-are-homeless>.

## A Convergence of Forces

It is important to also stress that the above numbers on substance use disorders and mental illnesses do not account for those suffering from *both* conditions. For instance, of the 344 unsheltered homeless people reporting substance use disorders and the 333 unsheltered homeless people reporting mental health disorders in 2025, 220 reported a co-occurrence of mental illness and substance use disorder, constituting 35.7% of the 617 people counted as unsheltered in 2025.

Moreover, 33% of all unsheltered homeless respondents (n=205) reported having a physical disability. Additionally, 116 unsheltered homeless people reported having both a substance use disorder and a physical disability (18%), while 142 reported having both a mental health disorder and a physical disability (23%). Lastly, 78 reported having all three (i.e., substance use disorder, mental health disorder, and physical disability). Only 42 unsheltered respondents having none of these conditions.<sup>7</sup>

The sheltered population generally mirrored that of the unsheltered population with respect to prevalence of these particular health conditions, as exhibited below in Figure 7.

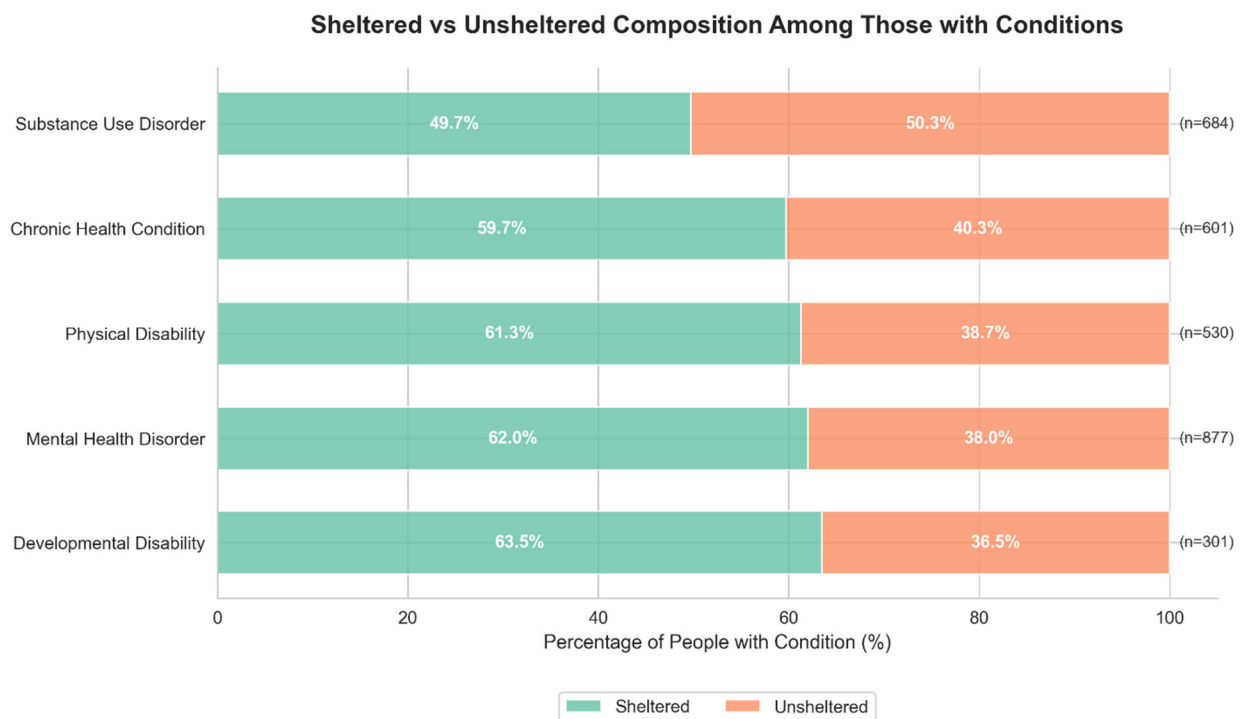


Figure 7: Comparison of prevalence of selected health conditions between the sheltered and unsheltered unhoused populations in 2025. Graph created by Clayton Gravatt, IntelliTect. Data source: 2025 PIT Count.

<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that of the 340 unsheltered respondents that cited having a substance use disorder, only 128 of them said that this condition “impairs the ability to hold a job or live independently.”

Substance use, mental illness, and physical disabilities constitute significant risk factors that enhance one's vulnerability of becoming unhoused and are highlighted because of common mischaracterizations. Evidence also points to additional risk factors, including: poverty, domestic violence, divorce, eviction, veteran status, felony conviction, and small social networks.<sup>8</sup> At a micro level, a significant medical bill, or car repair bill, can tax the budgets of people with limited resources. 67% of workers in the United States reported in 2025 that they live paycheck to paycheck.<sup>9</sup>

Risk factors are not inevitabilities. The significant majority of people with a listed risk factor are not and do not become unhoused.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the majority of people seeking treatment for substance use in Spokane County are housed and employed.<sup>11</sup> Nearly 8,000 people in Spokane County were reported to have entered state-funded drug and alcohol services in 2023, well above the 447 people counted with substance use conditions in the 2023 PIT.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, fatalities due to Fentanyl have dramatically increased in Spokane County, but the proportion of this population that is visible on the street represents a comparatively small segment of the population with substance use disorders in the general population.

Moreover, survey results estimate that 7.1% of the population in Spokane County suffered from serious mental illness in 2022.<sup>13</sup> With an estimated population of 549,835 in Spokane County in 2022, the total comes to 39,039 people, far exceeding the 495 people counted during the 2022 PIT who reported suffering from a serious mental health condition. In terms of poor mental health, the numbers are even higher (15.3% in 2023), with 35% of the population earning less than \$25,000/year reporting poor mental health.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, while these vulnerabilities contribute to determining *who* becomes unhoused, they are insufficient explanations as to why they became unhoused. Indeed, it is usually never just one thing that pushes somebody over the edge, as many PIT respondents report having multiple risk factors. These risk factors are also clearly related, as, for example, poverty increases one's risk of poor mental health. It is a convergence of factors at work in most cases, but none of them can explain the surge in the total number of unhoused people Spokane has experienced in recent years, or the notable variation in the rate of homelessness observed between CoCs.

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<sup>8</sup> Desmond, M. (2016) *Evicted: Poverty and profit in the American City*. New York: Broadway Books; Colburn, G., and Aldern, C. (2022). *Homelessness is a housing problem: How structural factors explain U.S. patterns*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

<sup>9</sup> Higman, A. (2025). 2025 sees rise in American's living paycheck to paycheck. Newsweek, September 14, URL: <https://www.newsweek.com/2025-rise-americans-living-paycheck-2128753>.

<sup>10</sup> Colburn, G., and Aldern, C. (2022). *Homelessness is a housing problem: How structural factors explain U.S. patterns*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

<sup>11</sup> King, R., and Bertram, H. (2025). Most overdose deaths in Spokane County among housed, employed adults, according to new report. KXLY News, February 4, URL: [https://www.kxly.com/news/most-overdose-deaths-in-spokane-county-among-housed-employed-adults-according-to-new-report/article\\_847e7a3e-e333-11ef-b976-17876bebf0.html](https://www.kxly.com/news/most-overdose-deaths-in-spokane-county-among-housed-employed-adults-according-to-new-report/article_847e7a3e-e333-11ef-b976-17876bebf0.html).

<sup>12</sup> Data source <https://countyhealthinsights.org/county/spokane/indicators/>.

<sup>13</sup> Data source <https://countyhealthinsights.org/county/spokane/indicators/>.

<sup>14</sup> Data source <https://countyhealthinsights.org/county/spokane/indicators/>.

As revealed by Greg Colburn and Clayton Aldern in their 2022 book *Homelessness is a Housing Problem*, Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Boston all exhibit notably higher rates of homelessness than cities like Chicago, Houston, Detroit, Cleveland, and St. Louis. Yet, because substance abuse, mental illness, poverty, etc., pervade each of these metropolitan regions with limited statistical variations, how can we explain this difference in homeless rates between cities? And how can we explain the sudden rise in homelessness in Spokane between 2015 and 2023, followed by its decline over the past two years? For instance, the Opioid crisis in the United States is long-standing, with similarly high rates of drug addiction reported in the late 2000s, when homelessness was far less of an issue in Spokane.

To answer these questions, one must consider certain characteristics of the housing market in the United States.

# The Structural Role of Housing

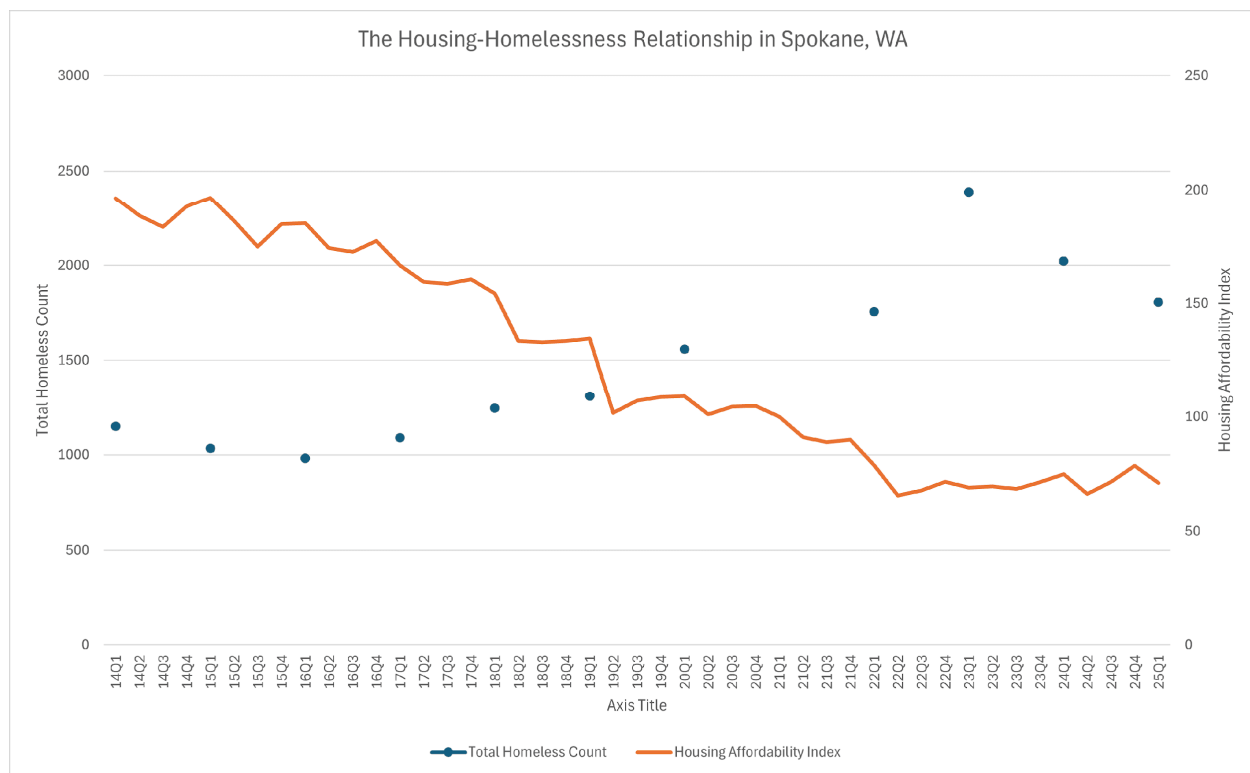


Figure 8: The relationship between the total homeless count and the housing affordability index in Spokane County, 2014-2025. Graph created by Dr. Matthew Anderson, Eastern Washington University. Data from Spokane Trends; City of Spokane

Figure 8 maps the Housing Affordability Index (HAI) next to the total homeless count in Spokane going back to 2014. The HAI is a composite score that measures overall affordability of a housing market based on existing data on median rents, housing sale prices, interest rates, utility costs, etc. A score of under 100 indicates a market that is interpreted as “unaffordable,” meaning that a significant number of residents cannot own/rent anything without spending over 30% of their monthly income on housing.

Generally, Spokane has historically been an affordable place to live, until 2017, when the HAI appears to drop significantly. The HAI fell below 100 in early 2022, where it continues to remain. At the same time, homelessness has increased dramatically. This is not a coincidence, as housing costs and vacancy rates are, together, tightly correlated with rates of homelessness, as demonstrated by Colburn and Aldern (2022).

In short, the more expensive housing becomes and the lower the vacancy rate (these two measures are inter-related), the greater the segment of the population in a given metropolitan region that becomes vulnerable to becoming unhoused, *before other risk factors are considered*. In other words, if you are experiencing a substance abuse disorder, mental health disorder,

physical disability, developmental disability, divorce, domestic violence, or merely faced with mounting medical bills, etc., you are more likely to be able to deal with these issues behind closed doors the more that housing is affordable and available. In Spokane, this vulnerable segment of the population was more likely to remain housed in 2015 than they are today.

Why did the total homeless count decline in 2024 and, again, in 2025? Based on Figure 7, housing costs are no longer rising, as of late 2022. Housing costs are not necessarily getting better either, but they are no longer getting worse. The vacancy rate, which plummeted to under 1% in 2021 (anything under 5% is considered a tight rental market), has since rebounded to around 4.5% today.<sup>15</sup>

Why has this happened? The City of Spokane has prioritized securing funding for the production of affordable housing units in recent years, which are beginning to bear fruit. We have seen record levels of permits for new housing developments in recent years, and many of these units are priced at the affordable level, where the need is greatest. With housing costs hitting a plateau and vacancies rising, the decline in the total number of unhoused people in Spokane is exactly what Colburn and Aldern (2022) would predict and therefore is consistent with what we should expect to see under such evolving (and more favorable) housing market conditions.

The CoC system is designed to be a homeless *response* system, meaning that it is entirely reactionary focused primarily on the system of service providers who respond to homelessness after it has happened. In terms of preventing homelessness from happening in the first place, the CoC is structurally ill-equipped. In other words, no matter how efficiently and successfully we can treat people and move them through the system, *if there are no housing units available to move people into at the end of the process, a choke point is created which backs the system up.*

If we can imagine the homeless management system as an emergency room (ER), we have been dealing with a situation where an increasing number of people are coming in with traffic-related injuries. In the US, we have responded by investing in bigger waiting rooms, more operating rooms, doctors, staff, etc., such that we can treat and move more people through the clinic and get them back onto the street. Yet, we have done very little to address why the streets have become less safe. As such, while we have augmented our ability to treat more people more efficiently, more people continue to pile into the waiting room, while there have not been enough places to move people to after they've been treated. What's causing this logjam is beyond the scope of what the CoC can control and is a historic relic of steady funding cuts to subsidized housing by the US federal government since the 1980s.<sup>16</sup> With that said, recent local and

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<sup>15</sup> Data source: <https://www.spokanetrends.org/>.

<sup>16</sup> Anderson, M., et al. (2024). (Com)passionate revanchism and the role of private-sector coalitions in the spatial management of homelessness. *Antipode*, 56(1): 26-48. Mitchell, D. (2011). Homelessness, American style. *Urban Geography*, 32(7): 933-56. Gowan, T. (2010). *Hobos, hustlers, and backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Beckett, K., and Herbert, S. (2010). *Banished: The new social control in urban America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Blomley, N. (2009). Homelessness, rights, and the delusions of property. *Urban Geography*, 30(6): 577-590.

intentional efforts to address the lack of affordable housing has begun to materialize, and it appears that we are now heading in the right direction.

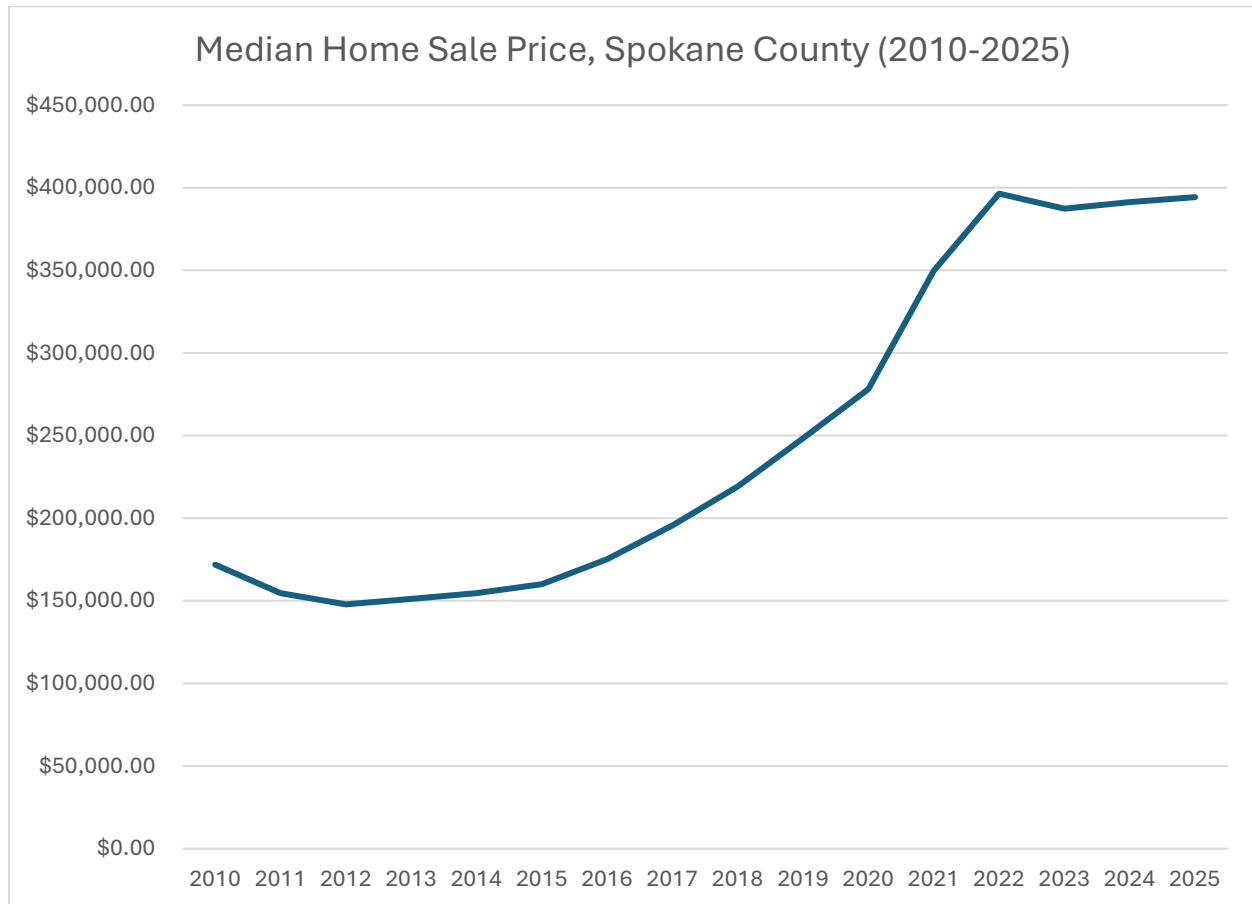


Figure 9: Median Home Sale Price, Spokane County (2010-2025). Graph created by Florence Osei, urban planning graduate student, Eastern Washington University. Data from Spokane County.

Figure 9 depicts the increase in the median home sale price in Spokane since 2000. The dramatic rise can be seen from 2016 until 2022, increasing from \$165,000 to over \$400,000 today. Inevitably, the next question is why did this happen? If Spokane has historically been an affordable place to live, what happened in 2016-2022 that changed? Why has Spokane become much more expensive? Why did the vacancy rate plummet to a historic low in 2021? The answer to this question is multifaceted, with some of the more prominent factors listed below (it is not intended to be an exhaustive list either). The order to which the following points appear should not necessarily be interpreted as an order of importance; it is not entirely clear the weight of impact that that should be assigned to some of these points:

### 1) Costs of construction

The cost of constructing new housing has significantly increased since 2020, prompting developers to raise prices to cover these greater costs. Indeed, as the real estate has historically pointed out, lowering the barriers to construction for developers should help

increase supply. However, what is often ignored in this argument are the many other mediating variables that can contribute to this problem.<sup>17</sup> If it were this simple, Kootenai County, ID – where lower construction costs, regulations, etc. are associated with greater housing supply and construction activity – should, thus, be exhibiting lower housing prices than in Spokane County. Yet, with a median home sale price of \$537,000 in 2025 (according to Zillow estimates), Kootenai County, ID is significantly more expensive.

## **2) Zoning for single-family homes**

Until 2022, roughly 70 percent of Spokane was zoned for single-family homes, which constitutes the least efficient way of housing people. Consequently, the space for producing additional housing (of any kind) has been sharply limited, until recent zoning changes increased space in Spokane for building higher density residential buildings. While this reality has historically checked against higher density housing construction in the city proper, the growth boundary has further limited the increasing of supply at the periphery.

## **3) Migration from more expensive places**

Since the late 2010s, Spokane has experienced a wave of migrants moving here from other typically more expensive places in the US (especially elsewhere on the west coast). Migrants have contributed to the increased housing demand and have been able to bid up the selling price. The price of housing is substantially higher in cities like Los Angeles (median home sale price of \$1 million, according to Zillow estimates) and San Francisco (median home sale price of \$1.5 million). Even within the State of Washington, there are cities considerably more expensive, like Seattle (median home sale price of \$885,000). While this has undoubtedly had an impact on the housing market in Spokane, just how big of an impact is not entirely clear due to data availability limitations.

## **4) Flipping and the loss of “middle-housing”**

When housing prices are increasing, landowners often find it lucrative to either increase the rent on their properties (if they are a landlord) or sell to a developer or someone who plans to renovate and “flip” the property for a profit. When this happens broadly, it usually means declining numbers of rental properties and the loss of what had previously been more affordable housing, as the renovated units are more expensive. Many duplexes, triplexes, and quadplexes have been lost in recent decades due to this progressive upgrading of the housing stock. Consequently, what were previously considered “starter homes” have steadily evaporated, and a notable gap in the housing ladder has emerged, where the lower rungs of affordable homeownership are in short supply, rendering an increasing segment of the population as perpetual renters. Moreover,

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<sup>17</sup> Anderson, et al. (2025). Landlord opposition to rent control and the politics of class monopoly rent. *Human Geography*, 18(1): 46-58.

the decline of single-room occupancy (SRO) hotels (often due to this kind of dynamic) since the 1980s have effectively removed what use to function as the housing of last resort for many people.

### **5) Short-term rentals**

The emergence of short-term rentals like Airbnb has also placed supply-related pressure on the long-term rental market. While it is unclear just how many housing units are listed on Airbnb in Spokane, these are units that are almost always reserved for tourists or visitors. As such, this is a segment of the housing market that can further exacerbate the housing supply problem.<sup>18</sup>

### **6) Algorithmic collusion: The case of RealPage, Inc.**

Since the Great Recession, financial institutions have heavily invested in the domestic real estate sector in the United States. Consequently, a significantly greater proportion of housing units in the rental sector have become owned by major investor-backed corporate landowners, real-estate investment trusts, and property management corporations.<sup>19</sup> Housing studies scholarship has demonstrated that these entities are far more likely to push rents up as high as they can go and use eviction as a profit strategy. They are also more likely to keep units vacant as a speculative strategy: why sign a lease now when you could wait for rents to increase further. Many of these entities have also contracted with RealPage, Inc., a “rent management” firm that deploys algorithmic technology to set rents on behalf of their clients.<sup>20</sup> RealPage has been sued for violating antitrust law as they admittedly treat all of their clients’ housing units as their own. In short, if landowners are collectively increasing the rent, then tenants have no choice but to pay the going rate, thereby overcoming otherwise normal competitive dynamics. It has been reported that RealPage has been active in Spokane, though the extent to which local landlords have contracted with RealPage is less clear.

### **7) Insufficient stock of subsidized housing and weak tenant rights laws in the US**

All of the above could be countered by a robust social safety net in the housing sector (and/or labor markets), but this has not existed in the US for decades and has always suffered in comparison with many other industrialized countries (e.g., Denmark, Netherlands, Austria, Singapore).<sup>21</sup> While stronger tenant rights legislation has recently

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<sup>18</sup> Grisdale, S. (2021). Displacement by disruption: short-term rentals and the political economy “belonging anywhere” in Toronto. *Urban Geography*, 42(5): 654-680.

<sup>19</sup> Tapp, R., and Peiser, R. (2023). An antitrust framework for housing. *Environment and Planning A*, 55: 562-582.

<sup>20</sup> Rodriguez-Pose, A., Storper, M. (2020). Housing, urban growth and inequalities: The limits to deregulation and upzoning in reducing economic and spatial inequality. *Urban Studies*, 57: 223-248; Zimmerman, A., and Anderson, M. (2025). Nefarious algorithms: Rent-fixing via algorithmic collusion and the role of intentionality in the pursuit of class monopoly rent. *Urban Science*, 9: 315: <https://doi.org/10.3390/urbansci9080315>.

<sup>21</sup> Anderson, et al. (2025). Landlord opposition to rent control and the politics of class monopoly rent. *Human Geography*, 18(1): 46-58.

been enacted in the State of Washington, such laws have historically been and continue to be weak and favorable to landlords. When housing prices are increasing, many landlords sell which often means existing tenants get evicted. Funding for subsidized or public housing has systematically eroded since the 1980s and is practically non-existent in comparison to most other industrialized countries.<sup>22</sup> As such, it is not a coincidence that homelessness in the US emerged as a visibly notable phenomenon across US cities in the 1980s. As a consequence, we are highly reliant on the private housing market to supply housing affordable to low-wage earners. However, every other type of housing promises greater profit margins and is thus more attractive among housing producers, unless sufficient subsidies exist to make it worth it for them. Sadly, existing levels of (and conditions for acquiring) subsidies remain, and have long been, insufficient.

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<sup>22</sup> Anderson, M. (2023). Our homeless policy is like putting a bandaid on internal bleeding. *Range*, September 23, URL: <https://rangemedia.co/spokane-us-homeless-policy-public-housing-anderson/>.

All of these factors have converged to create a perfect storm of escalating housing unaffordability, as depicted in Figure 10 below:

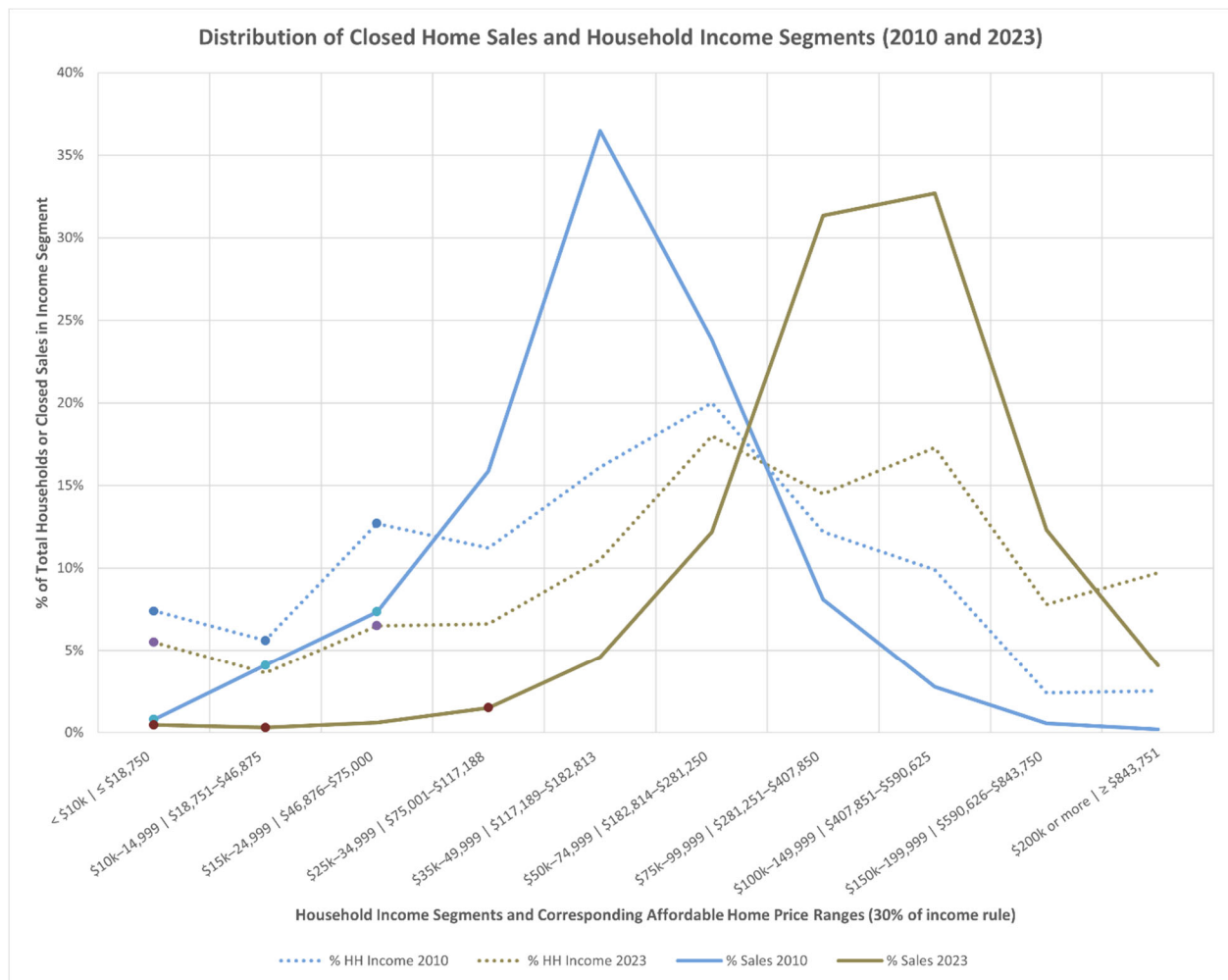


Figure 10: Distribution of home sales and household income, Spokane County (2010-2023). Graph created by Kenneth Moore, urban planning graduate student, Eastern Washington University. Data from Spokane County, US Census Bureau.

Figure 10 depicts the upward shift observed in Spokane’s housing market between 2010 and 2023. The Y-axis measures the percentage of houses sold for 2010, 2015, 2020, and 2023. In 2010 (measured by the solid blue line), the graph reveals that nearly 40% of the houses sold were priced between \$117K and \$182K. Another 25% were sold in the \$182K-\$281K price range. Just over 10% sold above \$281K.

In contrast, in 2023 (measured by the solid grey line), about 65% of the houses sold were priced between \$281K and \$590K, a substantial upward shift in housing prices. Another 15% were sold between \$590K and \$843K. Only 12% were sold in the \$182K-\$281K range, and under 5% were sold in the \$117K-\$182K range. In contrast, nearly 40% of the houses sold in 2010 were

priced in this range. Just over 15% of homes sold in 2010 were priced between \$75K and \$117K. In 2023, almost nothing was sold in this price range.

The dotted lines indicate household incomes, which did not increase nearly to the same degree, and especially for the lowest income households. In short, a much greater segment of the population in Spokane has been effectively priced out of the housing market during this timeframe. Far more households today must pay beyond (and in some cases well beyond) 30 percent of their monthly income on housing alone. If a household had previously considered houses priced at a certain level, what has happened is that these same households have had to downscale the type of housing to consider, moving down a rung on the housing ladder. Consequently, for those at the bottom of the ladder in 2010, these households have since been forced onto the rental market where vacancies proceeded to evaporate.

The worsening housing precarity related to this dynamic is what explains the rapid rise in homelessness observed during this same timeframe. If the rent is only \$800/month, you have a much better chance of managing whatever problems you may be facing than if the rent is \$1,600/month, or more. While all the risk factors discussed above, i.e., poverty, substance use, mental illness, physical disabilities, etc., contribute to determining *who* becomes homeless, housing costs and vacancy rates determine *how many* people are homeless.

Indeed, while the Spokane region needs more housing priced at all levels, *it does not necessarily follow that demand is the same at every price range*. **Housing that is affordable for the lowest income households is what is needed most in order to reduce the total homeless count further.** Demand at this level is greatest. This is the housing that sits just above the transitional housing stock managed by the CoC and is therefore critical in relieving the overcrowding in the metaphorical ER.

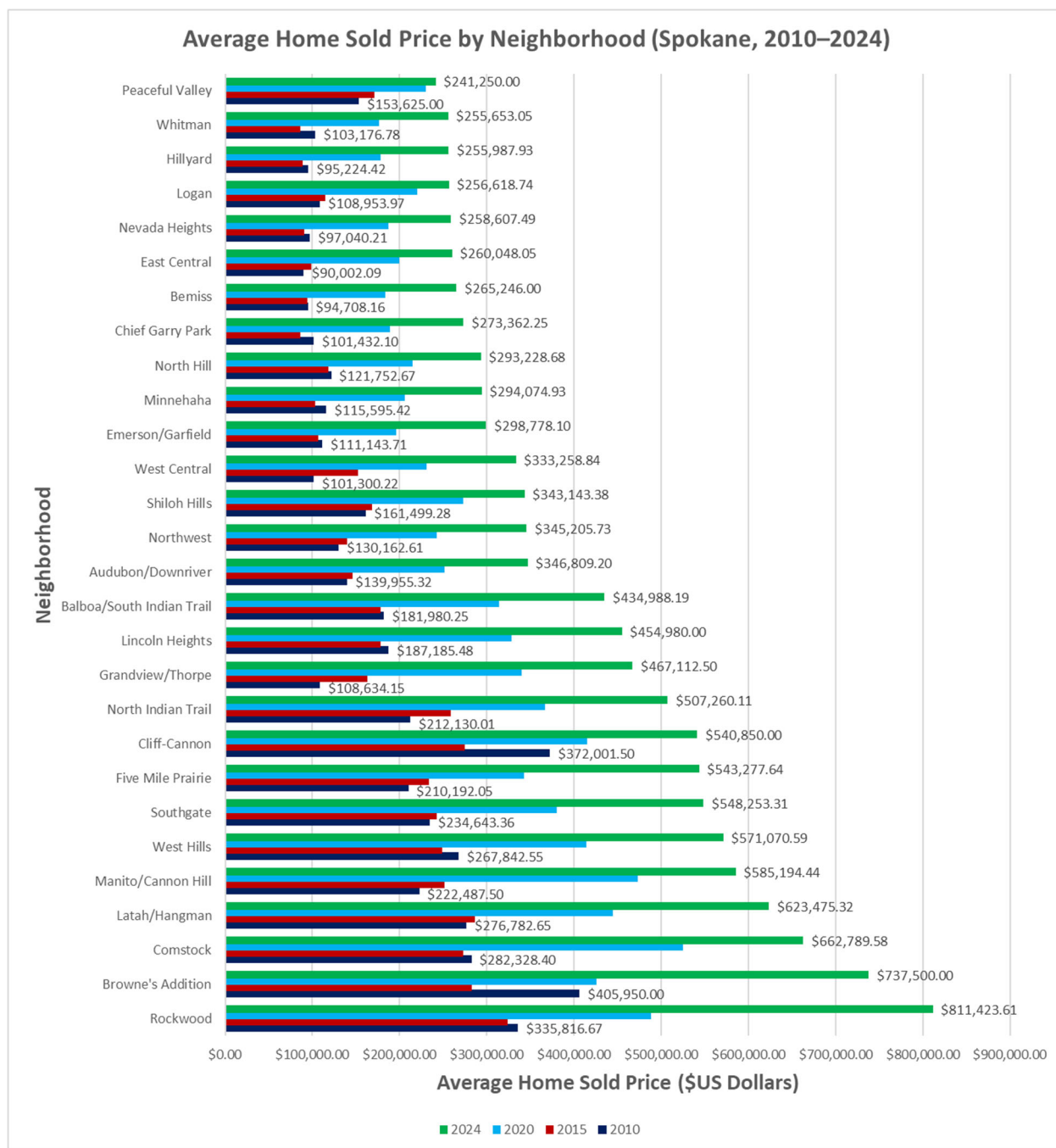


Figure 11: Average home sale price by neighborhood, Spokane (2010-2024). Graph created by Kenneth Moore, urban planning graduate student, Eastern Washington University. Data source: Spokane County, US Census Bureau.

Of course, housing prices have not necessarily increased evenly across Spokane during this timeframe. Figure 11 breaks down how each neighborhood in Spokane has fared. Indeed, the higher-income neighborhoods have observed the biggest aggregate increases (and mostly appear at the bottom of the graph depicted in Figure 11 above), such as Rockwood, Comstock, Latah/Hangman, Manito, etc. However, Browne's Addition should be noted here as this

neighborhood remains one of the notable clusters of more affordable rental housing in the city. But this graph is only telling part of the story.

When considering the increasing housing prices as percent change, from 2010-2024, the lower-income neighborhoods have experienced the biggest percent increases, nearly 230 percent in West Central, followed by East Central, Bemiss, Chief Gerry Park, Emerson/Garfield, and Hillyard (the higher-income housing produced in Grandview during this timeframe explains why this neighborhood sits at the top of Figure 12 below).

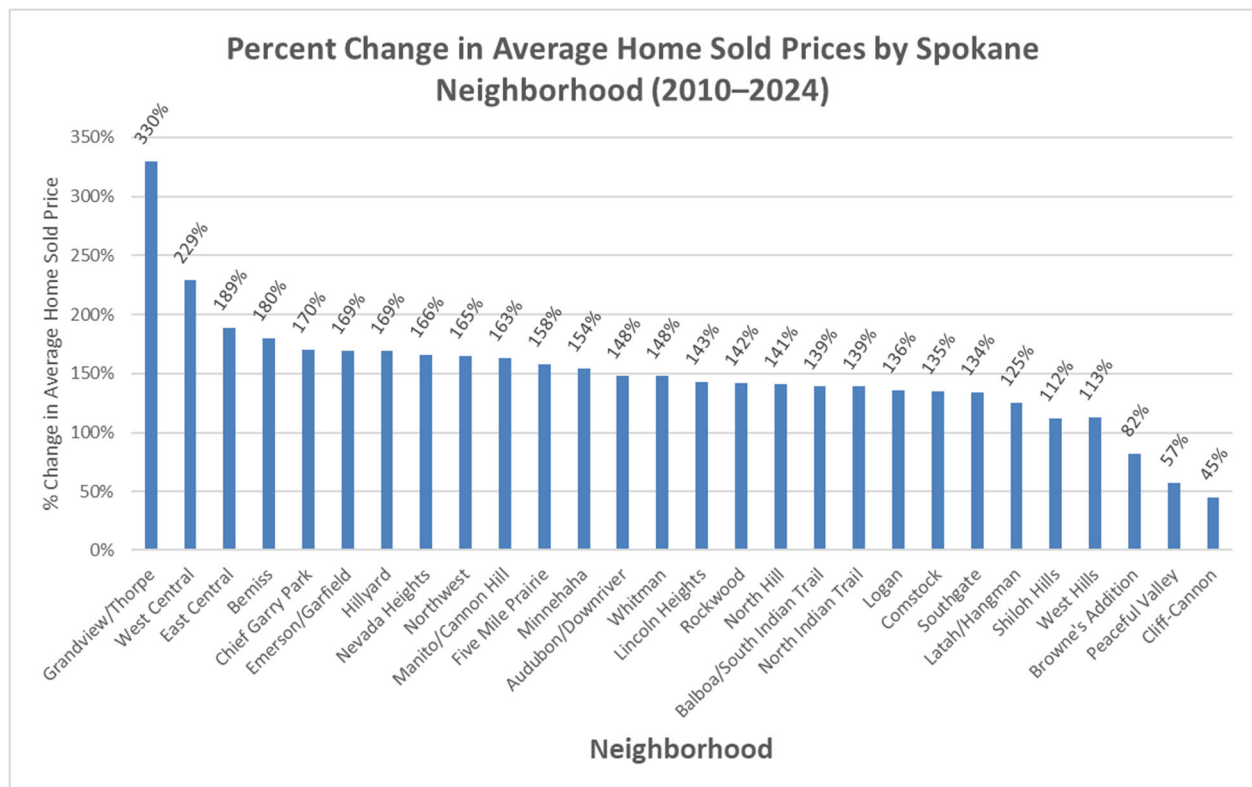


Figure 12: Percent change in average home sale prices by neighborhood, Spokane (2010-2024). Graph created by Kenneth Moore, urban planning graduate student, Eastern Washington University. Data source: Spokane County, US Census Bureau.

### Spatial distribution of evictions in Spokane (2018-2022)

Low-income neighborhoods highlighted

Rank	Neighborhood	% of total evictions
1	West Central	9.9%
2	Shiloh Hills	9.2%
3	Riverside	7.7%
4	Cliff-Cannon	7.6%
5	Nevada heights	7.5%
6	Logan	6.9%
7	East central	6.7%
8	Emmerson/ Garfield	6.7%
9	Hillyard	5.3%
10	Chief Garry	4.4%
11	North hill	4.1%
12	Bemiss	3.6%
13	Lincoln heights	3.2%
14	Minehaha	2.9%
15	Browne's addition	2.7%
16	Northwest	2.2%
17	Whitman	1.7%
18	Southgate	1.7%
19	Audubon/ Downriver	1.3%
20	West Hills	1.1%
21	Rockwood	0.7%
22	Balboa/ South Indian Trail	0.5%
23	North indian trail	0.5%
24	Latah / Hangman	0.5%
25	Manito/ Cannon hill	0.4%
26	Comstock	0.3%
27	Fivemile prairie	0.2%
28	Grand view/ Thorpe	0.2%
29	Peaceful valley	0.1%

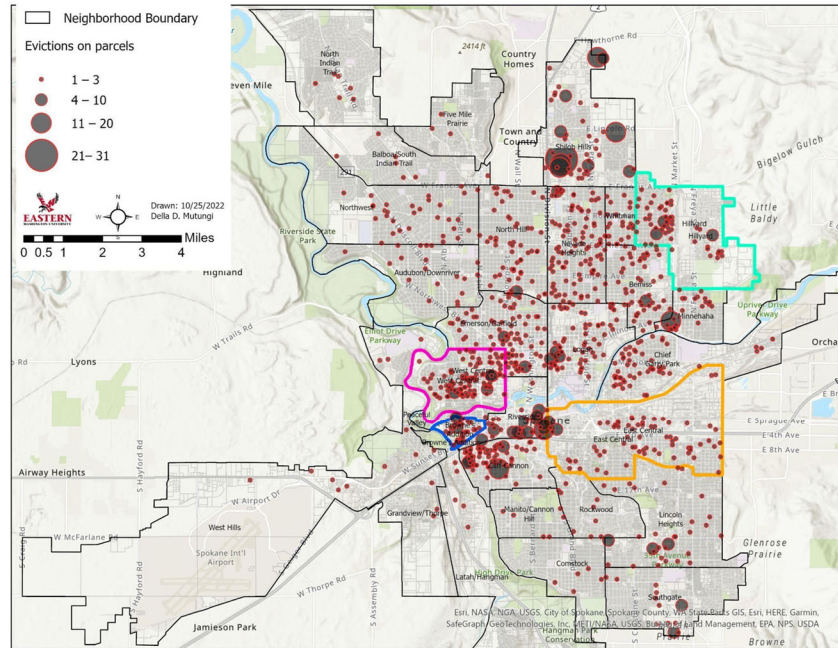


Figure 13: Spatial distribution of evictions in Spokane (2018-2022). Map created by Della Mutungi and Graham Zickefoose, former urban planning graduate students, Eastern Washington University. Data source: Spokane County.

When mapping all the evictions filed with the Spokane County Clerk's Office between 2018 and 2022, it is in these very same neighborhoods where we see the biggest eviction clusters. Uncoincidentally, the highlighted neighborhoods indicate where 33% of respondents in the 2022 PIT Count identified having previously lived before becoming homeless. Roughly 90% of the households that were evicted in this dataset were entirely due to not being able to pay the rent (as opposed to violating other tenets of the lease, e.g., property damage, complaints, etc.).

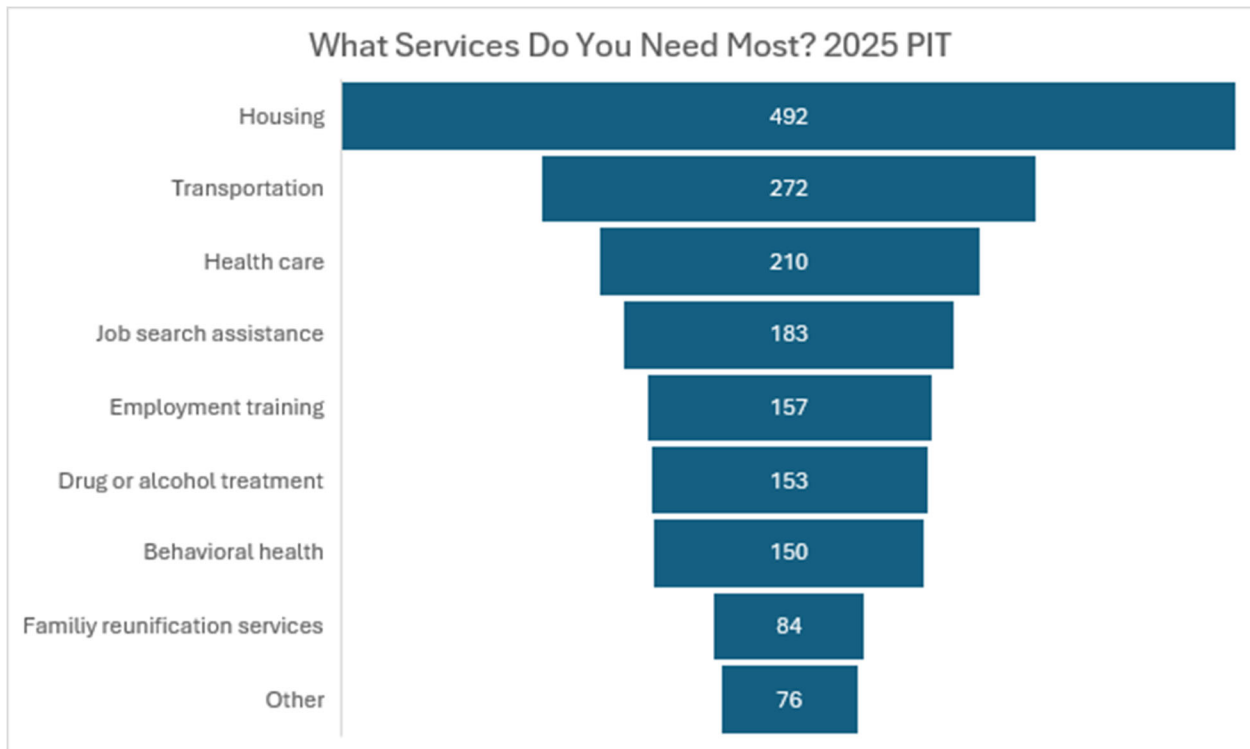


Figure 14: Results of the “what services do you need most” question from the 2025 PIT survey. Graph created by Dr. Matthew Anderson, Eastern Washington University. Data source: City of Spokane.

Of the unsheltered homeless people surveyed in this year’s PIT, when asked the question “what services do you need most,” unsurprisingly, the vast majority of respondents indicated housing. It is worth noting that respondents could select more than one thing, and indeed, the vast majority (over 90%) did select multiple things. After housing, transportation was mentioned 272 times, in second place. This may be surprising to see at first, but this is consistent with what we’ve found in previous years when this question has been asked. For instance, to be employed, most of us need access to some kind of transportation. Note that drug/alcohol treatment is not particularly high on this list, exhibited in Figure 14 above.

Family reunification services were mentioned by far the least number of times. Family reunification is often articulated as a recommended strategy to implement. The problem with this recommendation is that, first, the CoC is *already doing this*, and second, their family may be part of the reason why they are unhoused. This is particularly problematic for LGBTQ+ unhoused individuals. As we know, not having a strong or sufficient network of family and friends capable or willing to take you in during times of need is a well-established risk factor for becoming homeless. Another seemingly intuitive recommendation might be to add more emergency shelters, but we know that shelters do not necessarily lead to housing. Shelters are an intervention for homelessness *that night*, rather than a solution to the societal crisis of homelessness. There also needs to be transitional housing and other housing-related interventions, as discussed elsewhere above.

# Demographic Trends

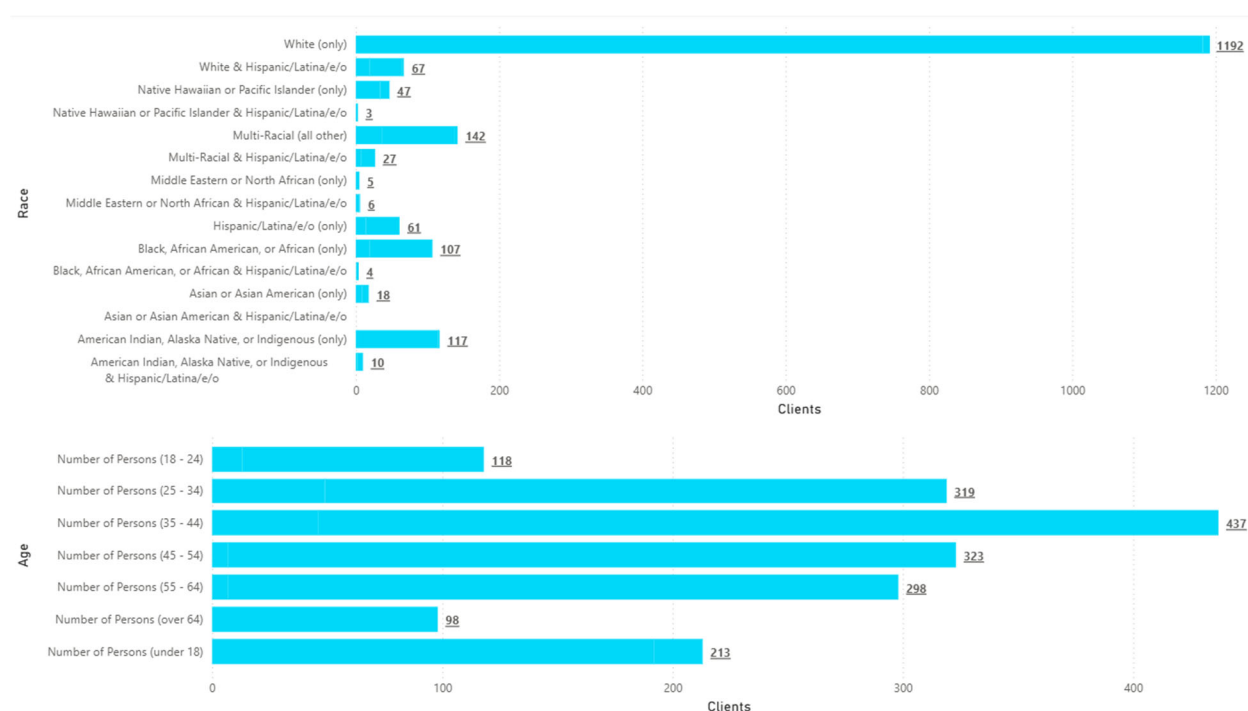


Figure 15: Chart created by HMIS Team, City of Spokane. Data source: 2025 PIT.

The racial composition of the total homeless population in Spokane is comparable to recent years. In short, the vast majority of the unhoused population continues to be white, reflecting the demographic composition of the general population in Spokane. Of note is that of the 118 American Indians or Alaska Natives counted, 108 of them were unsheltered. Comparable to recent years as well is the breakdown by age: the vast majority of unhoused people counted were between the age of 25 and 64, with the greatest number (437) falling in the 35-44 age bracket. Also noteworthy are the 213 individuals under 18.

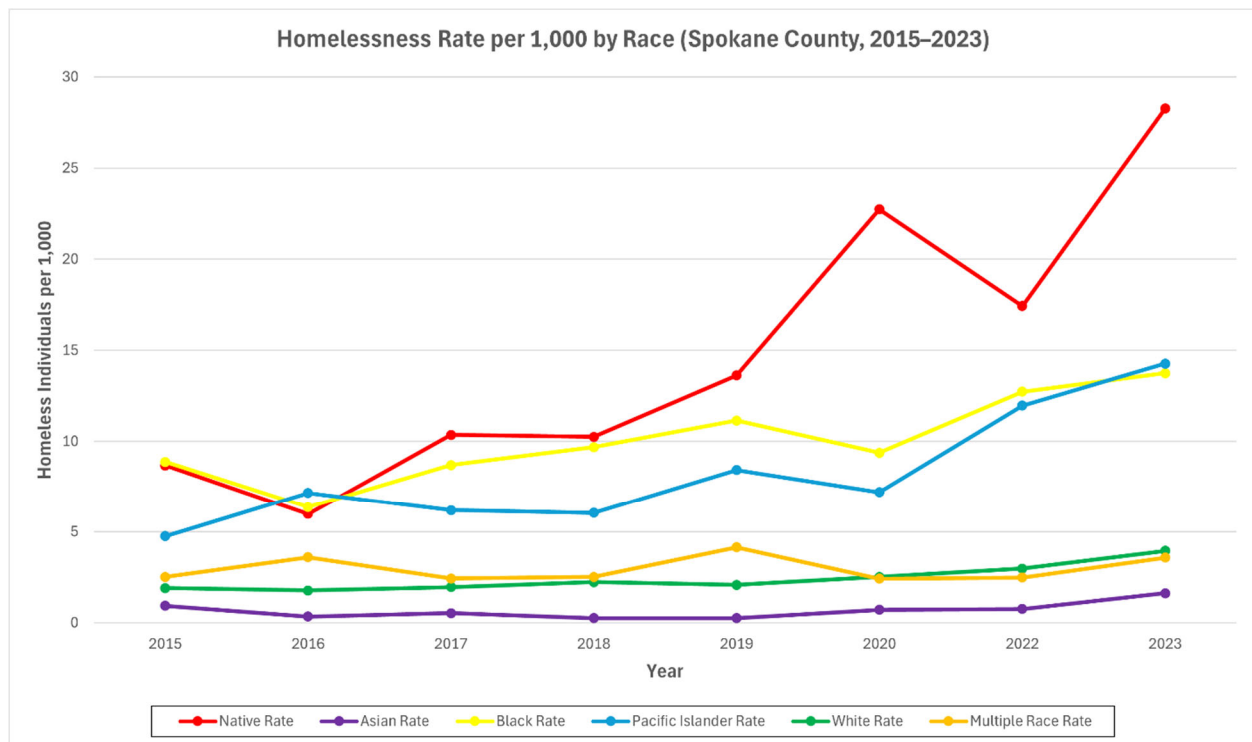


Figure 16: Rate of homelessness by population group in Spokane (2015-2023). Graph created by Kenneth Moore, urban planning graduate student, Eastern Washington University. Note: 2021 does not appear in this graph because there was no unsheltered count in 2021.

Another risk factor for becoming homeless is race. This is due to long-established discriminatory legacies. Of particular concern in this context is the rate of homelessness within the broader Native American population in Spokane County. Native Americans face a particularly outsized risk of becoming homeless, followed by African Americans and Native Pacific Islanders. Of the mixed-race individuals surveyed, most of them also included Native American backgrounds. To interpret the graph above, for every 1,000 people within the white population, 4 are homeless, as of 2025. Compared to the Native American population, this figure has risen to about 28 people for every 1,000 Native Americans. The difference is dramatic, and worsening.

## Conclusion

This report has dissected the individual, structural, and broader political factors that converge in producing homelessness in Spokane and beyond. Individual risk factors, such as race, substance use, mental illness, physical disabilities, domestic violence, insufficient social networks, etc., contribute to determining who is more likely to become unhoused, while housing costs and vacancy rates (in conjunction with an insufficient stock of subsidized housing affordable to low-wage earners in the United States in general) determine the total number of unhoused people. The forces contributing to rising housing costs are multifaceted, but recent efforts to increase the supply of housing units affordable to low-wage earners has helped reduce the total number of unhoused people in Spokane. Based on Colburn and Aldern's (2022) analysis, this is just what we should expect. Indeed, vacancies have increased as well, from a low of under 1% in 2021 to over 4% today. There is still a long way to go, but we are at least beginning to reverse the tide.

Lastly, misinformation about the causes of homelessness unfortunately pervades Spokane and beyond. Much of this report is offered in the spirit of combating this misinformation with empirical realities. Taking a more global perspective, it is worth reminding readers that homelessness tends to be far less evident in the rest of the industrialized world. It is also worth noting that city governments in the United States used to receive much more in the way of federal funding to balance their budgets. Much of this funding was cut in the 1980s, thereby forcing city governments into precarious fiscal positions at a time when their primary source of tax revenue (property and business tax revenue) was plummeting due to deindustrialization and continued suburbanization.<sup>23</sup>

Cities, consequently, have since been disciplined into forging new governing partnerships with business and real-estate interests in competition with other cities to lure companies that bring in the kind of white-collar, professional jobs that are supportive of reviving central city spaces as sites for profitable reinvestment. As a result, social welfare programs have been deprioritized as they tend not to be revenue-generating investments. The same goes for state-funded mental health hospitals, which suffered a similar fate in the 1980s (but have been steadily defunded since the 1960s).<sup>24</sup> City governments have been significantly deprived of their capacity to ensure a sufficient stock of subsidized housing that is affordable to low-wage earners and vulnerable population groups. Not only has federal funding for this housing-related safety-net declined, but city governments are also now less capable of meeting this growing need; that is, without increasing taxes, an often-unpopular proposal.

Yet, city governments are frequently where most complaints about visible homelessness are directed. Indeed, this topic remains hotly contested and debated at the local scale of urban

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<sup>23</sup> Wilson, W.J. (1996). *When work disappears*. New York: Vintage; Brenner, N., and Theodore, N. (2002). *Spaces of Neoliberalism: Urban restructuring in North America and Western Europe*. London: Wiley-Blackwell. Wilson, D., and Anderson, M. (2013). Urban economic restructuring. In Benton-Short, L. (ed.), *Cities of North America*. Washington, DC: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 113-141.

<sup>24</sup> Mitchell, D. (2011). Homelessness, American style. *Urban Geography*, 32(7): 933-56.

politics. But it rarely bubbles up to mark the national scale political landscape. The reality, however, is that this is less a problem that is local to Spokane, but more of a local manifestation of a larger, nationwide phenomenon. Spokane is not unique in this regard. This is a broader, structurally induced problem, where local, city-level capacity to respond has become sharply limited (with these limitations being more pronounced with higher housing costs and lower vacancy rates). As such, we sense a disconnect between the scale at which this issue manifests (the national scale) and the scale at which the governing intervention is understood to be best implemented (the local scale).

Following Colburn and Aldern, much could be done at the national scale to better enable city governments in their response to homelessness, such as redistribution of federal tax subsidies away from, for example, large corporations, the mortgage interest deduction, and defense spending, among other ideas. To these authors, such policy reforms could secure sufficient funding for subsidized housing programs without necessarily raising taxes on individual taxpayers.<sup>25</sup> National-scale funding to municipal governments tends to be higher in many other industrialized countries, where ensuring a sufficient stock of subsidized housing remains a higher national priority. In this context, while there is much we can do in Spokane to address this issue, much more is possible if local governments were more empowered to respond.

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<sup>25</sup> Colburn, G., and Aldern, C. (2022). *Homelessness is a housing problem: How structural factors explain U.S. patterns*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.