

## Talking Through the Numbers – Episode 8

# Minnesota's Unsheltered Homeless: Understanding Who's Affected

Through interviews with researchers, community leaders, and service providers, Wilder Research Executive Director Paul Mattessich examines pressing issues facing our communities today to offer insight beyond the numbers.

This episode of Talking Through the Numbers is available online at <https://www.wilder.org/featured-media/minnesotas-unsheltered-homeless>

### Transcript

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Paul Mattessich: Welcome. Welcome to Talking Through the Numbers, a podcast produced by Wilder Research. Our goal, to provide insight on significant issues, combining sound information with expert knowledge, to enrich our understanding of things that affect our communities and our world. I'm Paul Mattessich, executive director of Wilder Research. In this episode, our topic is the unsheltered homeless, that is homeless people who don't live in formal shelters. Two experts have come to the studio for our conversation. David Katzenmeyer is a program supervisor of project recovery and street outreach at People Incorporated Mental Health Services. He also serves as the coordinator for Outside In Outreach. David has spent the last eight years with People Incorporated's street outreach program in both Hennepin and Ramsey counties. Brian Pittman is a research scientist with Wilder Research. He has been an analyst for the Minnesota Homeless Study since 2006, and he helps coordinate outreach efforts to interview people staying outside of the formal shelter system.

So welcome to the studio. Thank you for sharing your expertise on this topic and maybe to set the stage, Brian, a first question would be about how many people in Minnesota are homeless?

Brian Pittman: Thanks Paul. It's good to be here. That's always hard to say because counting people who are experiencing homelessness can be a very hard thing to do. But in our study in 2018 we counted 10,233 people on one night in October and we know that misses a lot, so we actually try to estimate the total number of people who might be experiencing homelessness, and when we do that, we find that it can be upwards of 15 to 20,000 people who are experiencing homelessness on any given night in Minnesota. That number can be even higher when you look at the total number of people who are

experiencing homelessness over the course of an entire year. That that number has been upwards of 40 or 50,000.

Paul: 40 or 50,000.

Brian: Yeah, it's a lot of people and none of that even includes people who might be on the margins or in precariously housed situations or doubled up or overcrowded. That number is even higher than those.

Paul: So that 10,000 plus figure you first stated, is there a trend in that? Is that more or less than we've seen in previous studies?

Brian: It's more than we saw. The Minnesota statewide homeless study is conducted every three years on the third Thursday of October, and we've been doing it since 1991 statewide, and we did a couple of studies earlier than that in Saint Paul, but over... Since 2015 we actually saw a 10% increase in the total number of people experiencing homelessness. Where we were really concerned this year is that we saw a 62% increase in the number of people we counted outside of the formal shelter system. This is people who might be sleeping in their car, people who might be in encampments or sleeping on transit or staying under bridges or trying to cobble together different types of shelter. They might be staying at a friend's house or a family's house.

Paul: And that number increased 62%. About what is that number? So about how many homeless people are staying outside of formal shelter?

Brian: We counted about 2,700 during the last, in 2018, so that's represents almost a quarter of the total.

Paul: 2,700 out of the 10,000 or so on a single night. David, you see people who are homeless and who aren't part of the formal shelter system, and Brian, you do research to understand who those people are. What are the characteristics of a person who is most likely to be in that situation? Homeless, but without a formal place to stay.

David Katzenmeyer: For one thing, it's important to know that at least in the Twin Cities Metro, the emergency shelters are often full.

Paul: Sometimes it's just a matter of... It's the same as anybody else, they just happened to be last in line.

David: Yeah, but some of the more chronically unsheltered homeless people are people who struggle more with mental health or chemical health issues. Those issues are harder to maintain your mental or chemical health in a shelter setting.

Paul: So some of the people with those chronic problems might be more likely to stay outside of a shelter, and that's how they differ from the people that we would see in a formal shelter.

David: Yeah. And then there's also issues of the emergency shelter system currently doesn't have great options for people who have pets or people who are couples without minor children. Also, there's not always great storage at emergency shelters, so people with a decent amount of belongings. Some people in those sorts of demographics are more likely to stay outside to better accommodate those situations.

Brian: Yeah, and we see similar stuff in the data from our homeless study, and we see people who tend to have longer experiences in their current episode of homelessness. Almost two-thirds of people who are staying outside of the shelter system had been homeless for at least a year, and that's among the highest of the different types of shelter that we do the survey in. We also see higher numbers of middle aged men. We tend to see higher levels of chemical dependency or substance use disorder. One of the more concerning things, we see higher levels of self-reported violence while they were homeless, so we see people saying that they've been attacked while they've been homeless and that number is consistently higher for those who are staying outside of the shelter system. That's definitely one concerning thing we see.

Paul: You touched on some of the reasons, I think, mentioned them. Why is it that people stay outside of formal shelters? What are the primary reasons?

David: Well again, like I already mentioned on many nights, especially in the winter, almost every single night, there's literally not a space available for people.

Paul: So it's a question of numbers. That's one big reason.

David: Yep. And then also some people don't want to maybe wait in line or go into a lottery system and not know until maybe 5 or 6 o'clock that night if they have a space or not, and they'd just prefer to have to kind of hunker down and have the freedom to create their own space, whether it be in a tent or on a transit system or some people may have a vehicle they can stay in. Some people just feel more comfortable and have more control over that space if they're creating it on their own.

Paul: And sense of control in a sense gives them a positive feeling in some ways about that arrangement, as opposed to being in a shelter.

David: Yeah, and in addition, that way they don't also... If you're staying in a shelter, you're going to have to leave, often fairly early in the morning and you're not allowed back until later at night, so people still have to find somewhere to stay between 7 AM and 6 PM or so. Often people are more comfortable in a setting that they create on their own. Also, shelters often house or shelter dozens if not hundreds of people, so often people find it to be a more quiet setting in a tent with people who they maybe know or trust more.

Paul: Sure.

Brian: Yeah, and I also think there hasn't been a lot of increase in shelter capacity over the last decade or so. I think it's to what Dave was talking about with... They may go and try to in a shelter that might be full, there might not be capacity for them to stay there, so they have to go find something else. There's also sometimes if they are at a job or something and they work until 10 PM, some of the shelters might be closed so they have to cobble together something. I think that points also to... We ask on our study where people have stayed the last 30 days, the 30 days before the survey, and you see a lot of variation in the types of situations that people are staying in. As we mentioned earlier, about a quarter of the people interviewed were staying outside of the shelter system on the night of the survey.

Paul: On that night itself.

- Brian: Yeah, but if you look at the last 30 days, about 40% of homeless adults had spent at least one night outside or in another place not intended for habitation. You see a lot of going back and forth from the shelter to the outdoors.
- Paul: So people could be in a shelter, they could be outdoors or they could be living in a place that's not a shelter, staying with someone or in a car. Between the two of you, you've mentioned a variety of situations. I know it's hard to think of a typical person, but if you thought of a homeless person who doesn't have a formal shelter, like on the night of the survey, let's say, or any other night, what might their situation look like over a typical month, in a 30 day period? Would most of them only be in one kind of arrangement, or would a lot of them be in multiple arrangements changing from day to day or week to week? How does that play out?
- Brian: Yeah, we can't speak a lot to the differing or the varying situations outside of shelter, but we can tell whether they're in shelter, outside, in actual stable housing, or doubled up with friends, and what we see in our data is that for the people who are interviewed outside of the formal shelter system, so those stay in an outside and other situations, about half had spent the last 30 days mostly outside. So that's basically trying to find a spot on a train or on a bus or in a tent or something like that. And then the other half had been moving in between the shelters and doubled up with friends and that type of thing. It's kind of an interesting breakdown that you get basically a half who primarily stay outside and then a half who are trying to find other things.
- Paul: David, do you hear interesting stories about that. Do people recount how it is they would be spending a week or a month and the different alternatives that they take advantage of?
- David: Yeah, we see both sides of the coin. Sometimes when we're doing outreach, we have clients who maybe are able to maintain the same camping spot for months and sometimes a year or longer. But that's very challenging. We often see people who are maybe in and out of the shelter system because of availability or people sometimes have situations which lead to them get getting restricted from a shelter, so then they have to find somewhere else to stay for a while. People often camp out and then the weather might get really cold or it might be really rainy, and so they will leverage a relationship with a friend or a family member to be able to stay for a few days, and then they might come back and their tent and their belongings that they left behind might be gone, so then they're left to try and pick up the pieces and where do I go next, and maybe they spend that night on transit while they get some resources to create another space outside. We really see both sides of the coin. We see some people with consistent places and some people who bounce around and it can be a lot of work to experience homelessness.
- Paul: Both of you have mentioned transit. I ride the Green Line. I've seen people who seem to be establishing themselves for an evening when I'm riding the Green Line late at night. What's going on there? There was the controversy about the green line not running all night. What's happening there on transit?
- Brian: I think back in August, Met Council, or Met Transit cut back on service on the Green Line, and I think it's not running between 1 and 4 AM or... I'm not sure on those hours exactly. But it used to run all night, so if you didn't have a place to stay, it was a pretty

convenient warm place to stay. It was used quite a bit. I know some estimates from outreach folks would put the number at between 2 and 300 people on any given night. We did some interviewing as part of our study on transit and definitely I think we found at least a hundred people that we interviewed on transit that night and around transit stations. We also ask if they had stayed on transit in the past 12 months, and 40% of adults had stayed on some sort of transit in the last month. It was a highly utilized place to stay.

- Paul: And do those who stay on the light rail, do they differ from people who are in shelters or people who would set up a campsite, or are they pretty much the same.
- Brian: In our data tended to be some added levels of distress, and issues and barriers to housing. The people who are staying outside in general, we see higher levels of chemical dependency, mental health issues, those types of things. And then those we had kind of... When we did the analysis, those we found on transit or were heavy transit users, we found even higher levels. It is something that was serving the people who were having the higher levels of distress.
- David: If you consider the transit system as an encampment, I think there's definitely a majority of the time over the past few years that's probably been the largest encampment in the Twin Cities area. I know I spent a lot of time, especially last winter, doing outreach on transit, especially in front of Union Depot, and it was one of the most overwhelming and eye opening experiences as an outreach worker to see the trains pull in early in the morning and see almost literally every seat filled with somebody sleeping or under blankets or obviously using that train for shelter.
- Paul: Are these mostly men, women, children, mix?
- David: It's really a mix of... There's not a lot of children who are outside, or families with minor children. We do see it a little bit in Ramsey County because the family shelter system is often full or is full typically in Ramsey County, and there's often a fairly lengthy waiting list, and there are typically more shelter spaces for men than women. But yeah, we see a mix of both.
- Paul: Mix.
- Brian: I would say in the data we see a little bit higher proportion of men when we'd start talking about kind of unsheltered and then transit and things like that. But yeah, there's a lot of different people who use it.
- Paul: Sure, ok. You've mentioned campsites, tents. I think the general public feels they're seeing more tents and campsites in and around our cities. Do more of these campsites exists now in contrast to five years ago or 10 years ago, or are we just seeing them more? Or is it impossible to know?
- Brian: We have counts of people who are staying outside of the shelter system going back to 1991, but they can vary based on the outreach we did that year, what the weather was like that year and other things. But in general we've seen an increase, but I think there is a little bit more visibility to it. I think especially in the last year or so, when we've seen some high profile things like the Green Line use as shelter, and then there was the big encampments on Hiawatha Avenue that was getting press and news. I think in general,

because we see a higher number of people outside of the shelter system, you tend to see more people on the streets and things like that. I think it is more visible. I wouldn't say that there are more encampments today. I couldn't say either way really.

Paul: You mentioned that some people may have a campsite for a long time, other people may have to leave frequently, move from a campsite. Are there differences? Do some campsites turn over frequently or can people only stay there for the night and then they have to leave in the day? How does that work?

David: There's typically a variety of... There's areas in the city that are just common camping spots and those spots may have a lot of turnover and higher numbers of people in and out too, which may increase some of the oversight of that from maybe the police or something like that. Some of the sites that last longer are typically in more hidden areas, and those are the ones that the public is not likely to be seeing on a regular basis. Because a lot of people are displaced from their campsite based on... People are typically either camping on city property, parks property, department of transportation property, or private property. Each of those entities has different ways of-

Paul: Their own rules.

David: Of dealing with encampments, but none of them would typically allow an encampment to last very long.

Paul: Let's move a little bit towards solutions and thinking again of the unsheltered homeless. If you wanted to change someone's living situation, you wanted to move a person living outside into a shelter or into some form of stable housing, what type of effort does that take?

David: Well from a street outreach perspective, a lot of the folks that we engage with and talk to who are in unsheltered situations have really gone through this experience of having their hope and trust eroded over time. Often people have tried to seek help or tried to navigate systems to access benefits or resources and they've been unsuccessful in that. From a ground level, we're really trying to build those things back up and build some trust with people, build some rapport, build up some hope that things can maybe change. That's really the base that we're trying to lay with people by just getting to know people, maybe doing some small tasks with them to build some trust, like maybe helping somebody get an ID or helping somebody access food support or something like that, and bringing socks and hygiene things and some simple things like that. That kind of engagement and trust-building process often can take a long time.

Paul: Take a while, yeah.

David: You go through that and then at some point hopefully you can get somebody who's wanting to do a housing assessment to get on the county's priority wait list for housing. Once you're on that, then that's a whole other issue, because then you've built somebody up and they're, they're finally ready to access these services, and now those... In both Hennepin and Ramsey County, the priority wait list for homeless designated housing for single adults, each of those wait lists has over a thousand single adults on them right now.



Paul: So somebody may or may not get it, and even if they do, it may not be fast. Let me ask another question, maybe for each of you about this, thinking about solutions. If you had the resources... If you had the resources, what is the first thing you would do to help prevent and end homelessness?

Brian: I was going to hit on this after Dave's excellent answer about working individually with people who are unsheltered. I tend to think as a researcher about the systemic issue. Whenever I'm talking about homelessness with people or talking to groups, I think prevention is the key, and getting a strong social safety net that prevents people from falling.

Paul: What does that mean though? How would you do that?

Brian: Making sure that housing is actually there for people, and a right. That people don't get either kicked out of their housing, and if there's enough resources to then provide, to make sure that they don't lose their housing in the first place. One of the big things we see in our research is that homelessness begets homelessness. The longer someone is homeless, even just the act of becoming homeless will make it more likely that you either stay homeless or experience homelessness again. So the more you can minimize it, it's going to cost less in the long run, it's going to be a better option for everyone. I guess just increasing those social supports that can prevent people from falling into the cracks if things kind of go south for them.

Paul: David?

David: From a boots on the ground perspective, there's this spectrum of homeless services, from outreach to emergency shelter, to housing, and supportive services. I know you're asking for one thing and it's hard to advocate to increase on one part of the spectrum because we really need more diversity and capacity in all those areas of the spectrum. If I had to really hammer down on one thing, I'd say we really need more affordable housing for people. Especially more brick and mortar programs, more transitional housing programs for people. A lot of the housing that's designated for homeless people right now, all those programs are often competing for the same landlords, which is a very limited stock with rental caps and other things that we're having to deal with. So anything to kind of create that, to increase that housing stock or maybe increase the amount of landlords willing to work with these types of programs, I think.

Brian: Yeah, particularly programs that are going to be able to provide support services with particularly vulnerable populations that are dealing with complex and interrelated issues, that if you just plopped them down in an apartment, those issues may keep them from being able to stay at that apartment. So working with them to kind of stabilize and meeting them where they are as well. Because a lot of programs might require those or even subsidized housing may require people to be able to address those issues before they get housing, and that's a huge barrier to be able to address those issues. If you're not housed, those issues perpetuate and just get worse.

Paul: So we're approaching the end point of the conversation, but just maybe very quickly, if I could ask each of you, consider the typical person, a resident of any community in Minnesota or the United States. If they want to do some little thing, they can't devote their whole life to it, but there's maybe something that they could do to help end

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homelessness, what would you recommend to them or where could they go to get information or what should they do?

Brian: Well first I would recommend they go to [www.mnhomeless.org](http://www.mnhomeless.org), that's the website for our study, and that will help them figure out what the issue is and learn more about homelessness in general, and then provide them with the information to go out and talk to... I would say talk to their elected officials and tell them that this is a priority for them. That's one of the big ways we can get some of these social safety net services provided, is making sure that all elected officials know that their constituents think that this is an important thing because homelessness happens everywhere. It's not just in the Metro area, it's not just in Minneapolis and Saint Paul, Ramsey County and Hennepin County. We find that people we interview come from all over the state, so talk to your elected officials about that. And then I would donate money to programs like Dave's and other people who are providing services.

Paul: Yeah. Dave?

David: People who experience homelessness often go through stigmatizing and dehumanizing experiences constantly. It's easy to get kind of caught in that cycle and start to take on some of those things. I think the average person, as much as they can do to kind of break those things down when they're interacting with people. Acknowledging people who may be flying a sign or at an encampment or something, saying hi to people. Just treating people like human beings, I think can really go a long way to helping people.

Paul: Well, thank you. That sounds like a very practical kind of thing and something any of us could do. Well, thanks again to both of you, David Katzenmeyer from People Incorporated and Brian Pittman from Wilder Research. Please visit our website [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org) for more information, or the homelessness specific website, which Brian mentioned, [www.mnhomeless.org](http://www.mnhomeless.org). If you have suggestions for a future podcast, please let us know. I'm Paul Mattessich from Wilder Research and I look forward to talking through the numbers with you on other topics.

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