

Unsheltered Homelessness

Understanding the experiences and effects of
sleeping outside



Homelessness is a result of multiple system failures. This includes a profound shortage of housing for people with extremely low incomes, as well as inadequate systems to support complex, interrelated needs. In addition to a lack of housing, homelessness can be caused and sustained by trauma, systemic racism, unemployment, or personal health challenges. As a result, homelessness is different for every person who experiences it.

The Minnesota Homeless Study is unique in that it asks people to report on where they slept each night in the past month. Unlike a point-in-time count, which only considers one night of a person's experience, Minnesota Homeless Study data help us understand shelter patterns and how outcomes differ depending on whether and how often someone sleeps outside. The following brief uses this novel and robust data source to highlight unsheltered homelessness among adults (18+) and its relationship with health and well-being.

Issue Brief

This brief is part of a series that examines interview data from the 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study. Each report explores a specific aspect of homelessness and provides detailed data that can be used to inform services, interventions, and policies across our state.

For all available results from the study, as well as the Reservation Homeless Study, visit mnhomeless.org.

Key findings

These findings highlight *unsheltered* homelessness in Minnesota, focusing on adults (18+) who have slept outside for 15+ nights in the past month. This particular group represented 23% of the homeless adults in our study – about 1,300 people. However, we know this is an undercount. We cannot interview everyone experiencing homelessness, but, unlike those staying in the shelter system, we have no way of knowing how many more people were staying outside on the night of the study than we interviewed.



Unsheltered homelessness in Minnesota has increased over the past decade.¹



The alarming overrepresentation of Native Americans experiencing homelessness is magnified within the unsheltered population.



Unsheltered women experience much higher rates of violence and exploitation than men.



People experiencing unsheltered homelessness face profound substance use challenges, which often co-occur with mental health conditions.



High rates of previous incarceration create further instability for those who are unsheltered.



The majority of Minnesota's unsheltered population is stuck in long-term homelessness.

¹ Unsheltered homelessness includes spending the night outside, in a car or vacant building, or on public transportation.

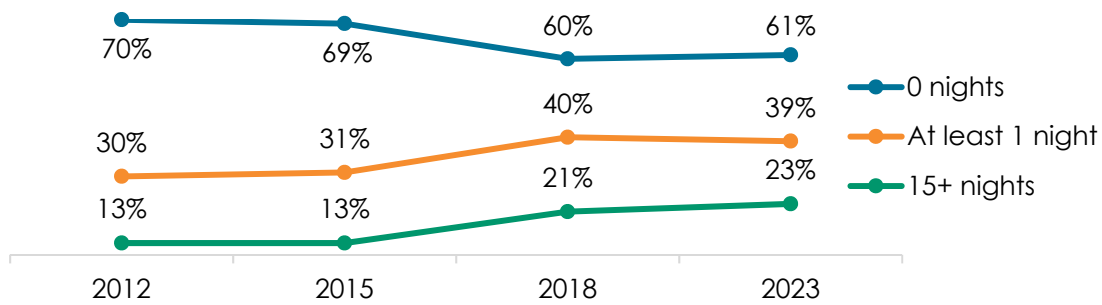
Unsheltered homelessness in Minnesota has increased over the past decade.

Unsheltered homelessness is complicated. On the one hand, it can be the most visible and stereotyped form of homelessness, conjuring images of roadside encampments and people asking for money on the streets. On the other hand, people sleeping outside can be some of the hardest to find, easily slipping through the gaps in our social service systems.

Over the past decade, Minnesota has seen a clear increase in unsheltered homelessness. In 2023, nearly one-quarter (23%) of the homeless population spent at least half of the previous month outside, compared to 13% in 2012 (Figure 1). Among all people experiencing homelessness, there has also been an increase in the average number of nights that people have slept outside in the past month, from 4 nights in 2012 to 7 nights in 2023. For the trend line showing all people experiencing homelessness, including those in shelter, see our [Single Night Count of People Experiencing Homelessness](#).

Two-thirds of people spending 15+ nights outside were interviewed in the 7-county metro area; however, the rate of unsheltered homelessness is similar between greater Minnesota and the Twin Cities metro. In greater Minnesota, 25% of people experiencing homelessness slept outside for 15+ nights during the month, compared to 22% in the Twin Cities metro (see [Homelessness in the Twin Cities and Greater Minnesota](#)).

1. Nights spent outside in the past month, 2012-2023



Source. 2012-2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

While the biggest increase in unsheltered homelessness appears to have occurred between the 2015 and 2018 Homeless Studies, the unprecedented level of federal funding for rental and housing assistance, spurred by the COVID-19 pandemic, likely prevented a greater increase between 2018 and 2023.

It can be easy to assume that people staying inside² — for example, in an emergency shelter—are consistently sheltered; however, the reality is far more complex. Shelter systems in Minnesota, and across the country, are stretched to capacity. In other words, many people must piece together shelter options, sometimes having to sleep outside.

Of people interviewed inside on October 26, 2023,

27%

were unsheltered at some point in the past month

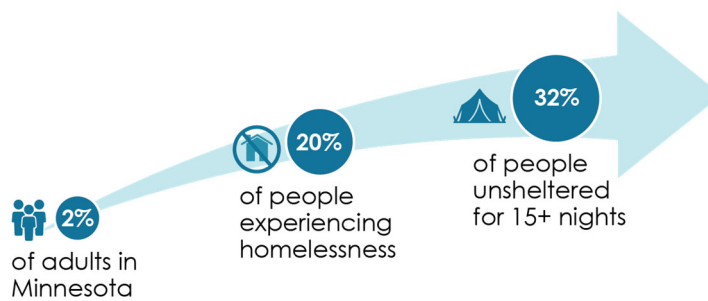
² Those staying inside were most often in emergency shelters, but also could have been staying in transitional housing, a voucher program, unstably doubled-up, or about to be evicted with nowhere else to go.

The alarming overrepresentation of Native Americans experiencing homelessness is magnified within the unsheltered population.

Systemic racism, including a history of genocide, slavery, segregation, redlining and other housing discrimination, and lack of access to financial systems has created huge racial disparities in wealth and homeownership in our country. For Native American people experiencing homelessness, these disparities are compounded within the unsheltered population.

While Native Americans make up only 2% of Minnesota's adult population,³ they represent 20% of the overall homeless population and 32% of people who were unsheltered for at least half of the month (Figure 2). This disproportionality is larger for Native Americans than any other racial or ethnic group.

2. Proportion of Native Americans in the state population, in the overall homeless population, and experiencing unsheltered homelessness (15+ nights)



Sources. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews and 2023 data from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Note. Respondents could choose more than one racial or ethnic identity. 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data are not included in this issue brief, as tribes own their data; those data are reported separately.

The disparity is slightly larger in the Twin Cities metro, where 34% of people who slept outside for at least half of the month were Native American, compared to 29% in greater Minnesota. It is important to note that Native American reservations also experience high rates of unsheltered homelessness. Reservation Homeless Study data are not included in this report. Those data are analyzed and aggregated separately, guided by principles of data sovereignty.

While Homeless Study data cannot explicitly tell us why such a high proportion of Native Americans are unsheltered, our data and insights from study partners suggest a few possible reasons. Rates of substance use are high within the unsheltered population. Among Native Americans who slept outside for at least half of the month, 57% had used methamphetamine and 43% had used fentanyl – compared to Native Americans who were sheltered all month (8% had used methamphetamine and 7% had used fentanyl). Additionally, Native Americans may sleep outside due to the lack of culturally welcoming spaces. People sometimes prefer sleeping outside, especially if it brings them closer to their cultural community. Responses to community challenges have often excluded the communities which are most oppressed, creating further distrust. For example, it wasn't until 2014—just 10 years ago—that Native communities had an official presence in the homeless response system with the formation of the [Minnesota Tribal Collaborative to Prevent and End Homelessness \(the “Tribal Collaborative”\).](#)⁴

³ U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *Population Estimates Program 2023 Vintage*. Retrieved August 2024 from <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest.html>. This percentage includes multi-racial.

⁴ Minnesota Tribal Collaborative to Prevent and End Homelessness. (n.d.) <https://mntribalcollaborative.org/about-us/>

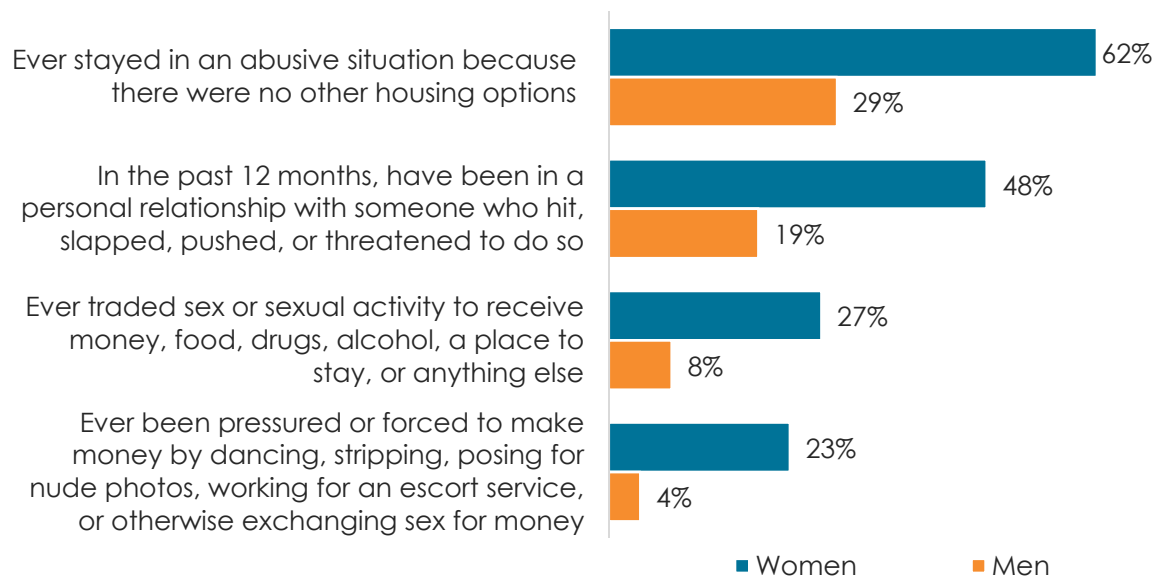
Unsheltered women experience much higher rates of violence and exploitation than men.

Sleeping outside creates additional vulnerability for people who are already dealing with a variety of personal and systemic challenges. Those who were unsheltered (15+ nights outside) were more likely to have ever been attacked or assaulted while homeless (51%) compared to people who were sheltered for the full month (28%).

For women—who account for 35% of people experiencing unsheltered homelessness (15+ nights)—rates of violence and exploitation are higher; 57% of unsheltered women have been attacked or assaulted while homeless, compared to 48% of men.⁵ Because the number of unsheltered people who identify as transgender or non-binary in the study is so small, we do not report their results here.

Women are far more impacted by intimate partner violence and exploitative transactions to meet their basic needs. For example, six in ten women (62%) who spent at least half of the past month unsheltered had stayed in an abusive situation because they had no other housing options, compared to 29% of men who said the same (Figure 3).

3. Experiences of violence and exploitation among the unsheltered population (15+ nights), by gender



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

These findings highlight a landscape in which women are more often forced to make difficult trade-offs and are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and unsafe situations. As such, interventions that work for women sleeping outside will look different from those for men.

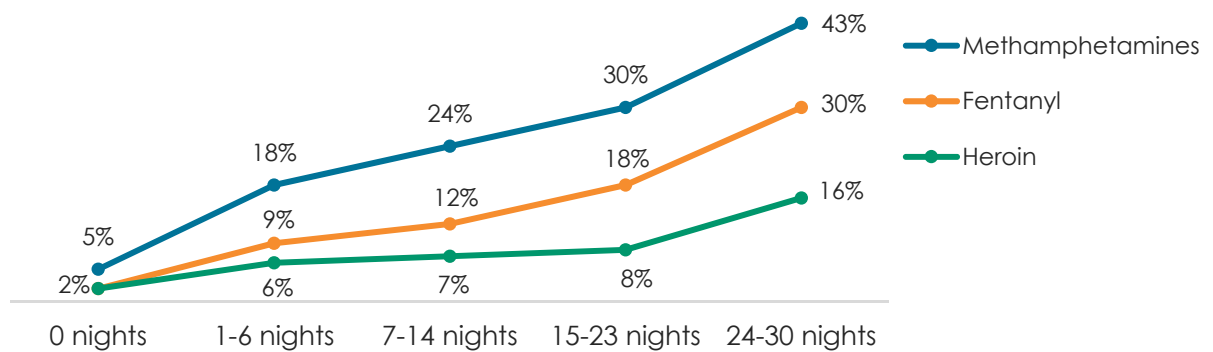
⁵ For the purposes of this analysis, “men” and “women” refer to cisgender men and women.

People experiencing unsheltered homelessness face profound substance use challenges, which often co-occur with mental health conditions.

Substance use and mental health interact with homelessness in multiple ways. Untreated, mental health conditions or substance use can contribute to becoming homeless. They can also create barriers to accessing shelter or stable housing, due to sobriety policies or problematic behaviors that could impact other residents. At the same time, homelessness can worsen a person’s substance use or mental health condition, perpetuating the cycle of homelessness.

Minnesota Homeless Study data show that rates of drug use increase as the number of nights spent outside increases. The prevalence of methamphetamine and fentanyl use is especially shocking among those who are unsheltered. For example, the rate of fentanyl use was 15 times higher for someone who spent 24-30 nights outside (30%) than for someone who was in shelter the full month (2%). The rate of methamphetamine use was 8.6 times higher (43% compared to 5%; Figure 4). Rates of legal substance use (i.e., alcohol and marijuana) also increase as the number of nights spent outside increases, but not as sharply.

4. Illegal substances used in the past 30 days, by nights unsheltered



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

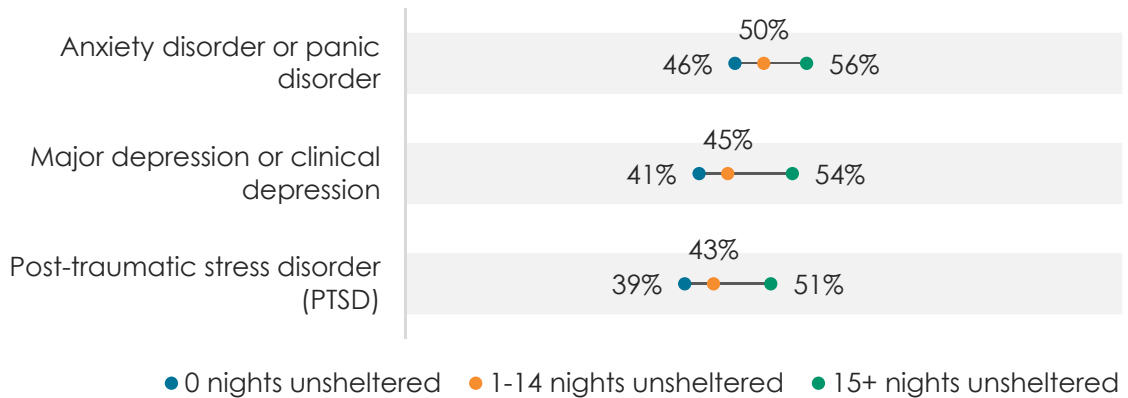
In addition, the rate of people experiencing a nonfatal drug overdose in the past year is four times higher for people who were unsheltered 15+ nights (17%) than for people who were in shelter all month (4%). Sadly, this is still an undercount, as the Homeless Study only accounts for *non-fatal* overdoses. For information on *fatal* overdoses, see the Minnesota Department of Health’s [Minnesota Homeless Mortality Report, 2017-2021](#).

Substance use often co-occurs with mental health challenges (together known as “behavioral health”). Behavioral health challenges are typically higher among those experiencing homelessness than in the general population, but even more so for people who spent at least half of the month sleeping outside. The majority (84%) of people who slept for 15+ nights outside had mental health or substance use challenges that would be significant barriers to getting housing or even shelter,⁶ compared to 63% who were sheltered for the full month.

⁶ This includes being diagnosed with a mental health condition or substance use disorder in the past two years, going to outpatient mental health or substance use treatment in the past two years, or using illegal substances in the past 30 days.

Those who were unsheltered for at least half of the month were also more likely to report that they had a recent diagnosis of anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder (Figure 5).

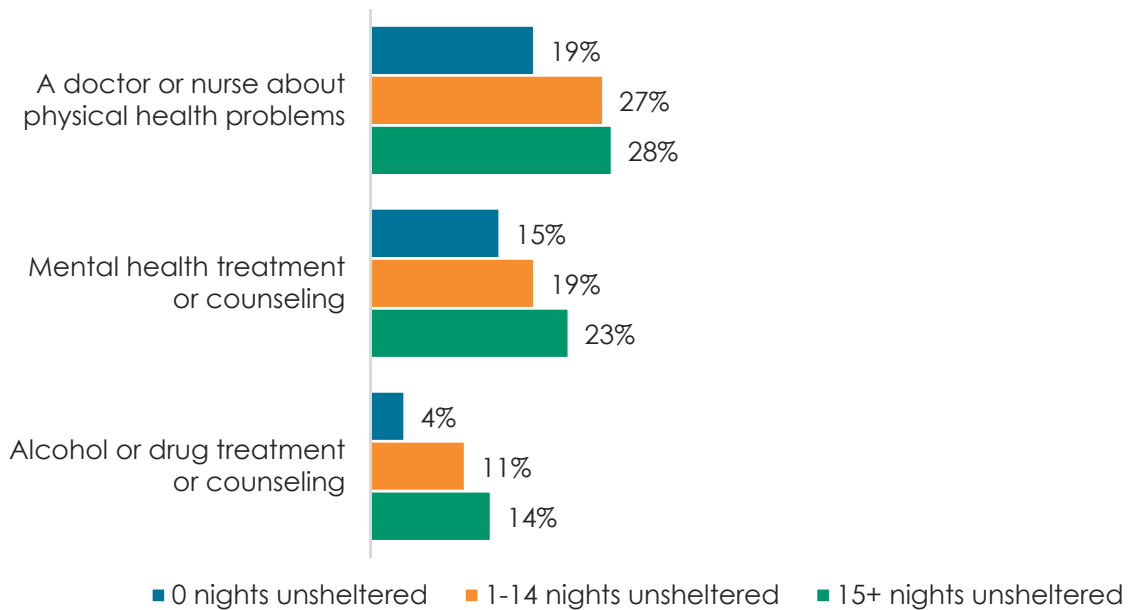
5. Top mental health challenges, by nights unsheltered



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

While substance use and mental health challenges are higher among those who are unsheltered, this population is less likely to receive needed behavioral health services (Figure 6). They are also less likely to receive needed physical health services; however, it is worth noting that rates of self-reported physical health challenges are similar between those who are sheltered and unsheltered.

6. Health services needed but unable to get, by nights unsheltered



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

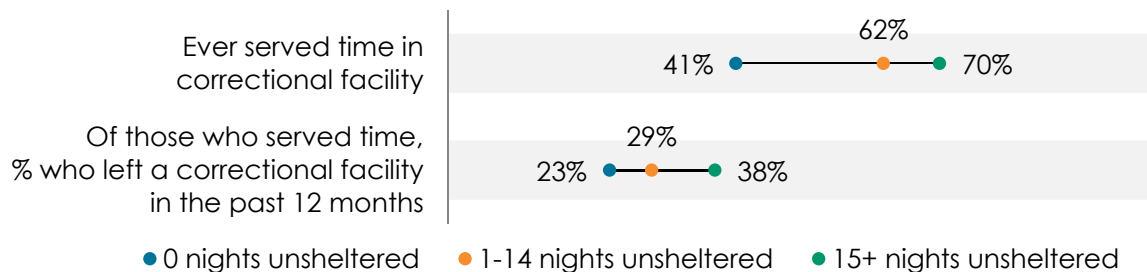
Shelters can help stabilize a person’s behavioral health because there may be trained staff on-site to provide services or assist in a crisis; however, this is a level of service that not all shelters can implement or sustain. Especially for people who are unsheltered, services very clearly need to be aimed at supporting individuals’ specific mental health and substance use challenges.

High rates of previous incarceration create further instability for those who are unsheltered.

Like substance use and addiction, criminal history is a destabilizing factor that increases a person’s risk of homelessness, while also prolonging or worsening a person’s experience with homelessness. Multiple research studies have shown a bidirectional link between incarceration and homelessness, meaning that “individuals experiencing homelessness are more likely to be incarcerated and former inmates are more likely to become homeless.”⁷ A 2021 report describes the cycle of incarceration and homelessness as follows: “Individuals with justice involvement are 7-13 times more likely to experience homelessness, increasing with each instance of incarceration. The combination of limited services, limited housing opportunities, and complex health challenges contribute to the cycle of re-incarceration, greatly costing the individual and the community at large.”⁸

As someone spends more time outside, the rate of previous involvement with the criminal justice system increases. In Minnesota, the majority of people who were unsheltered for 15+ nights had served time in the criminal justice system (70%), which includes county jail, workhouse, juvenile detention, state prison, or federal prison; 38% of those who served time had left a correctional facility in the past 12 months. Both proportions are higher than for those who were in shelter for the previous month (Figure 7).

7. History of incarceration, by nights unsheltered



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews
 Note. Correctional facilities include county jail, workhouse, juvenile detention center, state prison, and federal prison.

In looking at the smaller subset of people who were unsheltered at least half of the month *and* who had left a correctional facility in the past year, there is clear, circular movement between streets and jail. The majority of this subgroup was homeless when they entered their last correctional facility (84%) and had no stable housing when they left (71%).

Of the people who were unsheltered 15+ nights and who had served time in the past year



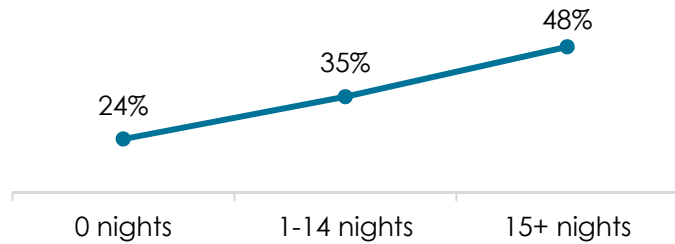
Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

⁷ Cusack, M., & Montgomery, A. E. (2017). Examining the bidirectional association between veteran homelessness and incarceration within the context of permanent supportive housing. *Psychological services, 14*(2), 250–256. <https://doi.org/10.1037/ser0000110>

⁸ National Nurse-Led Care Consortium. (2021). *How health care center teams can address health and housing for patients involved with the justice system.* https://nurseledcare.phmc.org/images/pdf/NCA/2021/2020_justice_involved_publication_Final.pdf

People who were unsheltered for at least half of the month were twice as likely to have a felony conviction (48%) as those who were fully sheltered for the month (24%; Figure 8).

8. Ever had a felony conviction, by nights unsheltered



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

A history of incarceration or criminal convictions can severely limit a person’s ability to secure housing⁹ because many landlords bar any type of criminal background among residents. For those who were unsheltered at least half of the month, having a criminal background was the second highest barrier to getting housing, after “no affordable housing” (Figure 9).

9. Top 3 barriers to getting housing, by nights unsheltered

Ever had difficulty renting or getting housing because...	0 nights unsheltered	1-14 nights unsheltered	15+ nights unsheltered
No housing you could afford	47%	54%	54%
Criminal background	19%	31%	37%
Credit problems	33%	37%	35%

Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

Unfortunately, the June 2024 Supreme Court ruling in *City of Grants Pass, Oregon v. Johnson* will have the opposite effect of what is currently needed. “Under the ruling, localities will be able to arrest, ticket, and fine people for sleeping outdoors on public property, even if leaders have failed to produce enough affordable housing or shelter for everyone in the community who needs it.”¹⁰ While this type of law may reduce the visibility of unsheltered homelessness, it will almost certainly create even steeper barriers to getting housed.

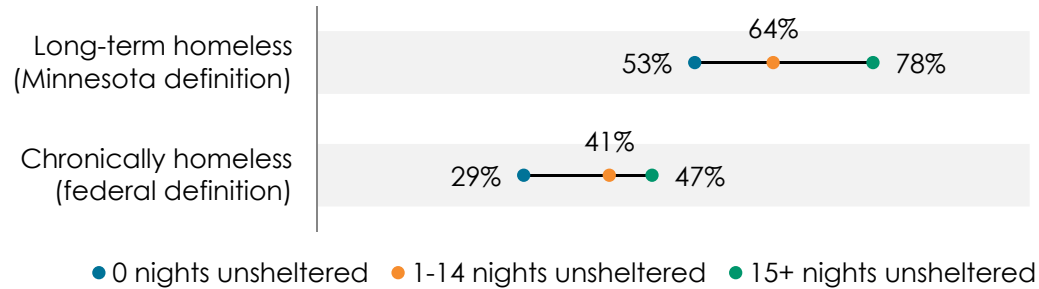
⁹ Couloute, L. (2018). *Nowhere to go: Homelessness among formerly incarcerated people*. Prison Policy Initiative. <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/housing.html>

¹⁰ National Alliance to End Homelessness. (2024). *National Alliance to End Homelessness Statement on the Supreme Court’s Ruling in City of Grants Pass, Oregon v. Johnson*. <https://endhomelessness.org/blog/national-alliance-to-end-homelessness-statement-on-the-supreme-courts-ruling-in-city-of-grants-pass-oregon-v-johnson/>

The majority of Minnesota’s unsheltered population is stuck in long-term homelessness.

People experiencing unsheltered homelessness were more likely to be long-term homeless (78%)—meaning they had been homeless for a year or more, or four or more times in the past three years—than those who had shelter for the past month (53%; Figure 10).

10. History of homelessness, by nights unsheltered



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

Note. Long-term homeless (Minnesota definition): Homeless for a year or longer currently or 4 or more times in the last 3 years, Chronically homeless (federal definition): Homeless for a year or longer currently or 4 or more times in the last 3 years and with a serious or chronic disability

The high rate of repeated and long-term homelessness indicates that there are not enough long-term, trauma-informed services to meet the complex needs of this population. People who are unsheltered continually face barriers to finding housing, and even shelter beds. For example, those who slept outside for 15+ nights out of the month were twice as likely to be turned away from shelter in the past three months, compared to those who were sheltered for the full month.



While there is a great deal more work to do in providing services to this high-needs population, study data also indicate that people who are unsheltered are receiving important services. The Minnesota Homeless Study asks respondents about services they may have received in October 2023. Of these services, outreach and drop-in centers were among the top five most helpful services chosen by people who had slept outside for at least half of the month (Figure 11).

11. Top five most helpful services received in October 2023, people unsheltered 15+ nights

	15+ nights unsheltered
Free hot meals	45%
Food Stamps or SNAP	32%
Outreach services like a street worker	27%
Free clothes at a clothing shelf	22%
Help from drop-in centers or opportunity centers	21%

Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews

The increase in unsheltered homelessness over the past decade, racial disparities, and the prevalence of challenges within the unsheltered population each point to ongoing systemic failures. On their own, challenges related to substance use, mental health, or a criminal history can contribute to becoming homeless; at the same time, these issues are exacerbated as the number of nights spent outside increases, further contributing to homelessness. This deeply engraved cycle, evident by the high rates of people experiencing long-term homelessness, is nearly impossible to disrupt without intensive, holistic, trauma-informed services.

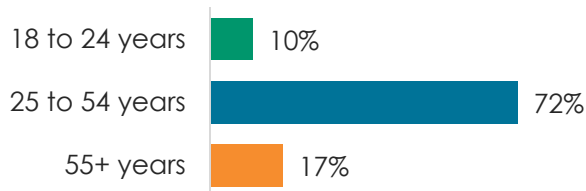
Similarly, the alarming overrepresentation of Native Americans within the unsheltered population indicates the deep need for culturally based services and solutions, while the high proportion of women who have experienced violence and exploitation speak to the need for gender-specific services. It is critical for policymakers, funders, and service providers to continue to build trusting relationships with communities, and to ground services in the cultures and experiences of those most in need of support. Only then can our state move people off of the street and into shelter and, ultimately, permanent housing. If Minnesota can get these systems and services right for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness, we will all benefit.

Wilder will continue to look at study data to highlight findings that can equip providers, advocates, and lawmakers with information to improve services and advance public policies.



Adults who are unsheltered for 15+ nights in the month

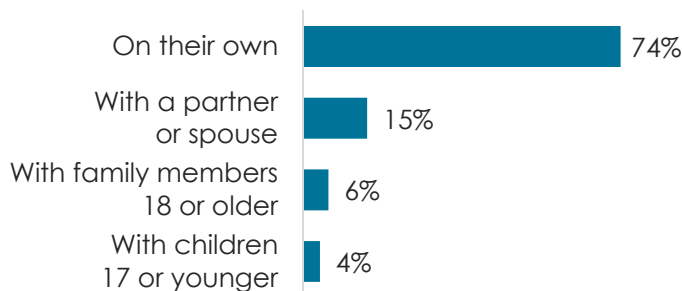
Age



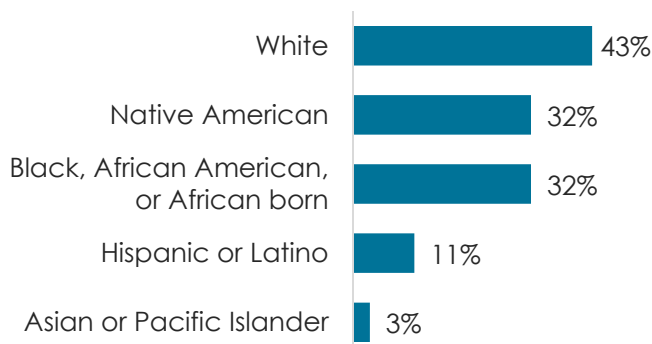
- **Average age:** 41 years old
- **Average age of first homelessness:** 26 years old
- In addition, 42 children (under 18 with their parents) were unsheltered for 15+ nights during the month.

Family structure

On the night of the study, respondents were staying:

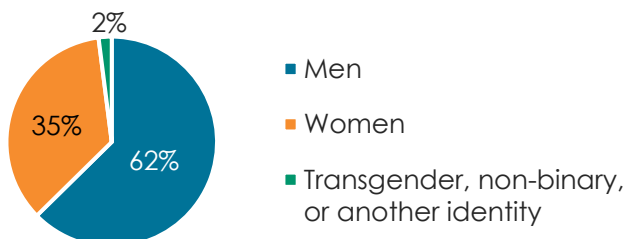


Racial and ethnic identities



Note: Respondents could choose more than one identity.

Gender identity



About the study

Every three years, Wilder Research conducts a one-day statewide study to better understand the prevalence of homelessness in Minnesota and the circumstances of those experiencing homelessness. The most recent study took place on October 26, 2023, and included:

- **Face-to-face interviews** with people throughout the state who meet a [federal definition of homelessness](#).
- **A count** of people experiencing homelessness.

In addition, six tribes in Minnesota partnered with Wilder Research to conduct the 2023 Reservation Homeless Study. This study took place during a similar time as the Minnesota Homeless Study and honors tribal ownership of their data. This report **does not include Reservation Study data**, as those data are owned by the tribes. An aggregate report on reservation homelessness will be published in 2025.

A note about sample sizes. Throughout this report, sample sizes, or Ns, vary by question. In general, weighted Ns for the three primary categories in this brief are:

- 0 nights unsheltered, n=3,547
- 1-14 nights unsheltered, n=919
- 15+ nights unsheltered, n=1,332

Readers should not try to calculate question-level Ns based on these tables. Visit mnhomeless.org for detailed, question-by-question data tables.

The study is an independent initiative of Wilder Research in partnership with public and private funders and in-kind support from service providers throughout the state. For more information about this report, call Wilder Research, 651-280-2700, or visit mnhomeless.org.

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