

**WASHINGTON COUNTY  
HOMELESS STUDY  
SUMMARY**

# **The Homeless in Washington County: Invisible and Isolated in the Midst of Plenty**

## **I. Introduction**

Washington County's population has grown more rapidly over the past fifteen years than almost any other county in Oregon. In turn, this growth has created an unprecedented boom in housing development. Unfortunately, this development has been predominantly in the upper end of the housing market and affordability for low and moderate income households has declined.

At the same time, federal policies over the past fifteen years have contributed to an increase in homelessness and those at risk of homelessness. This is due to a decrease in the development and availability of affordable housing. At the same time, low income people have suffered a decline in real wages.

Washington County is not exempt from the growing incidence of homelessness. Since one night shelter counts began in 1990, there has been a steady increase in the number of homeless or households at risk of homelessness.

In addition, many homeless people in Washington County remain hidden from the general population, living in cars or camping out. The relative invisibility of homelessness makes it all the harder to combat.

While those homeless who are in-shelter or who have called for assistance are "easiest" to see or count, a broader perspective in planning for housing and services is needed in order to address this problem.

## II. Background

**Low income population:** Approximately 15% of Washington County's population is very low income by HUD (Housing and Urban Development) standards. There are 17,309 households (approximately 45,176 individuals) who potentially suffer from the lack of affordable housing and are at-risk for homelessness.

In addition to the low income population described above, Washington County is home to a large, growing and unaccounted-for population of farmworkers. Nearly 12,000 workers are needed to sustain the agricultural economy of the county. For most, decent housing is out of financial reach. The average family size of five is larger than the county's average of 2.61. They earn on average \$4.88 per hour--approximately \$10,500 per year.

**Housing availability:** Washington County has 126,716 housing units, 90% lie within urbanized areas. Sixty one percent are owner occupied and 39% (50,248 units) are rental properties..

**Rent:** Average rents are not affordable for low income households. Average rent is \$528 (with a range of \$350-\$850) per month for a 2 bedroom apartment. A 3 person, very low-income family, however, can only afford \$443 per month. Seventy nine percent of low income households pay over 30% of their household income for housing.. Sixty-seven percent pay over 50% of their income for housing.

**Subsidized housing:** Existing subsidized housing currently serves only 37% of eligible households. The County Department of Housing Services has a two to four-year waiting list for its rental assistance programs.

**Vacancy rates:** Vacancy rates in all rental housing are low. For example, the May 1993 vacancy rate in Aloha was 3.5%, in Hillsboro it was 3.6%.

**Overcrowding:** In large rental units, 62.3% of residents report "overcrowding".

### III. The Homeless Population

#### A. How Many Homeless?

The four Washington County shelters received 6419 requests for shelter from July 1, 1992 to June 30 1993. While this may not be an unduplicated number, it indicates the magnitude of the problem. Between 3,000 and 6,000 individuals seek shelter or support services to deal with homeless issues each year in Washington County.

However, these numbers do not necessarily include the uncounted. Uncounted homeless include such as those who 1) do not seek shelter, 2) are doubled up or in an otherwise insecure housing situation, or 3) receive homeless services by means of other service delivery systems (mental health, alcohol and drug).

Of those requesting services, 1163 individuals in 477 households received shelter. Over half (57%) of the households sheltered were families. Children represent over half (52%) of the individuals who were sheltered.

#### B. Who are the Homeless?

The homeless population consists of a wide variety of people faced with economic problems such as unemployment, underemployment, or lack of benefits such as health insurance.

In addition, many:

- are families -- often headed by single women -- over 38%
- are children -- over 50%
- are affected by domestic violence
- have difficulty finding affordable housing and employment.

Also:

- some have special emotional or physical disabilities
- they are more likely to have household members who have been involved in the criminal justice system
- they are more likely to be of a minority ethnic origin.

#### IV. The Homeless Service System

##### A. Existing Homeless Resources

###### Services to the homeless and those at-risk of homelessness consist of

- homeless prevention (rent assistance programs, mortgage foreclosure prevention, etc.),
- shelter and transitional housing and related case management
- programs for those with special needs who are at risk of homelessness because of illness or disability or other factor (for example, those who receive assistance with medications or personal care.)
- resources available to all low-income persons (energy assistance, Aid to Families with Dependent Children, food stamps, etc.)

Shelters: There are three general access emergency shelters in Washington County: Washington County Community Action Organization Family Shelter, Interfaith Outreach Services (October through April) and the Domestic Violence Resource Center Shelter. In October through April, these shelters can house up to 55 people. The rest of the year, their capacity is 41. Housing Services of Oregon also has 3 beds available that it uses for either emergency or transitional housing depending on client needs.

In addition, there are a very small number of shelter beds available for special needs populations such as youth, chronically mentally ill, disabled individuals.

Transitional housing: There are 117-131 beds (depending on family size) of transitional housing available in the county. Of those, 96 are for special needs populations (Chronically mentally ill, youth and alcohol/drug addicted women). These services are provided by a variety of organizations.

##### B. Gaps in the Service System

The most significant issue in relation to homelessness is the lack of available, affordable housing for low and moderate income households. Once sheltered, a homeless family or individual may use their shelter stay to optimal advantage, but the limited supply of affordable housing may preclude a successful move to stable housing. However, with effective services, homeless people stand a better chance of acquiring and keeping housing.

Service gaps fall into four main categories:

Education/Advocacy:

- limited public awareness and sensitivity to the needs of the homeless
- lack of awareness of both the general public and service providers regarding the nature and extent of domestic violence

**Funding:**

- inadequate resources to maintain current services and hire skilled staff
- limited resources for affordable housing development
- limited support by both the public and business sectors for homeless services

**Housing:**

- lack of affordable housing and emergency assistance to prevent homelessness

**System, or service delivery:**

- limited services for specific populations (youth, veterans, single men)
- inadequate capacity to serve those in need or seeking assistance
- limited coordination between service providers and local government

**V. Options/Recommendations**

- A. Increase the number, type, and location of permanent affordable housing**
- B. Stabilize the current emergency system**
- C. Establish a continuum of services including:**
  - Prevention--keeping people in their homes
  - Emergency Intervention -- getting people housed temporarily
  - Transitional or bridge programs -- housing is subsidiary to case management and support services.
  - Follow-up or stabilization services -- support to keep people in permanent housing
  - Assisted Housing -- support for those who require ongoing assistance in order to maintain themselves in housing
- D. Increase coordination at all levels of service system**
- E. Increase prevention resources (i.e., rent assistance)**
- F. Implement consistent data gathering and record keeping in order to track trends within the homeless population**
- G. Provide transitional services in both temporary and permanent housing**

## Definitions

A **homeless person** is a person who is living without a fixed address or permanent residence. This includes individuals and families

- in an emergency or transitional shelter
- seeking shelter
- not actively seeking shelter (i.e., camped out)

**At-risk of homelessness** are those families, households and individuals who

- are doubled up with family or friends
- are threatened with eviction
- live in unstable housing situations
- pay over 50% of household income for rent and utilities
- live in substandard housing
- earn less than 30% of area median income

**Affordable housing**, according to HUD, means that no more than 30% of gross household income goes to rent and utilities.

**Low income households or individuals**, according to HUD, are those who earn less than 50% of area median income, adjusted for family size. In Washington County, a low income household of four earns less than \$21,150.

**Extremely low income households or individuals**, according to HUD, are those who earn less than 30% of the area median income, adjusted for family size. In Washington County, an extremely low income household of four earns less than \$12,690.