

How did we get here? *A history of homelessness*

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Following the end of World War II, homelessness was a relatively rare occurrence. Employment rates were high, and there was plenty of affordable housing and public supports to help individuals and families remain housed. Affordable rental housing and very inexpensive single room occupancy (SRO) housing was abundant in most cities (Invisible People, The Paw Print).

In the 1980's many changes aided and abetted an increase in the homeless populations across the nation. Most significant were the demolition of older buildings that provided the work force with affordable housing (SRO), together with the closure of long-term care institutions for individuals with mental health issues. The closure of these institutions occurred at the same time as a significant reduction in federal spending for affordable housing.

Without enough matching community-based housing and services for those who had to be institutionalized, homelessness continued to rise throughout the 1990s within that population. In addition, from an economic perspective, many low-skill labor jobs that offered living wages were lost and were replaced by a low-wage service economy. To further complicate the problem, funding to assist low-income people through public services did not match the growing need, leaving many people unserved.

The Great Recession of 2007-2009 caused many people to default on their mortgages due to various economic factors, which in turn caused a substantial increase in foreclosures, evictions, and unemployment. The housing crisis combined with significant reductions in federal funding for need-based assistance programs pushed many individuals and families into homelessness.

Between 2016-2019, communities across the nation have seen huge increases in unsheltered homelessness. Steadily increasing rental prices, combined with low vacancy rates and a healthy housing market, have continued to push citizens out of housing and onto the street. Landlords who may have been holding onto their property due to the housing crisis in 2007-2008, are seizing the opportunity to sell their rental homes as the housing market has ballooned, further displacing hundreds of low-wage and sometimes even middle-class earners.

Locally, monthly rent in Thurston County has increased by an average of \$200.00 since 2016, creating a 30% increase in homelessness. Communities across the nation, and particularly on the west coast are experiencing unprecedented numbers of unsheltered families and individuals living in unmanaged encampments, RVs, cars, and on the streets (Thurston Region Planning Council; 2012, Byrne et al.).

Resources to learn more:

[Drivers of Homelessness in Washington State: A Department of Commerce](#) presentation video

[Invisible People History of Homelessness](#)

The Paw Print Denuyl, C. (October 2011): [A Brief History of Homelessness](#)