

Homelessness crisis rises across the US Midwest

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The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) released its 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) on March 18. Also called the Point-in-Time (PIT) report, the AHAR graphs changes in the numbers of sheltered and unsheltered homeless people from year to year. The PIT report concluded that nationally, homelessness had increased even before the economic impact of the pandemic. 580,466 people were homeless on a single night in January 2020—an increase of 2.2 percent from 2019. Homelessness has increased for the previous four years.

The economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have already resulted in a sharp increase in homelessness in the Midwest. A larger crisis looms when the federal eviction moratorium, extended again on March 29 through June 30, is allowed to expire. The federal eviction moratorium has never included rent forgiveness for tenants, meaning that thousands of dollars of debt are accumulating that cannot be repaid.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends that homeless encampments not be razed to help contain coronavirus spread. Nonetheless, homeless encampments have been subject to being cleared out by municipalities, spreading the COVID-19 pandemic as individuals are forced to seek out new shelter.

These efforts to clear out homeless encampments also involve police violence. A March 18 clearing out of a homeless encampment in Minneapolis, Minnesota, was denounced by the public for recorded brutality on the part of the Minneapolis Police Department. A video of the incident shows an officer kneeling on a protester's neck or back. The city is currently the site of the trial of Derek Chauvin, the police officer who knelt on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes in May 2020 and sparked protests by tens of millions of people across the globe. Minnesota is estimated to have 20,000 homeless people on any given night.

The Minnesota legislature has begun to discuss ways to lift the state's eviction moratorium. Approximately 100,000 Minnesota households are behind on rent, owing a combined total of \$200 million. Even if the legislature does not remove the restriction on evictions tenants are at risk. The state is one of seven that does not require landlords to give written notice before filing an eviction lawsuit. Once a lawsuit is filed, tenants can be kicked out for failure to pay rent in only nine days. More than 600 people have lost their housing to eviction lawsuits during the state moratorium.

ABC News affiliate KCRG in Cedar Rapids, Iowa revealed that

Linn County officials emailed the office of Governor Kim Reynolds pleading for the Johnson & Johnson vaccine to be distributed to vulnerable populations, including the homeless. The state had granted 3,200 doses to Hy-Vee supermarkets to vaccinate Collins Aerospace employees, but gave nothing to the underserved.

In the email Tricia Kitzmann, community health division manager for Linn County Public Health, complained, "It is becoming increasingly clear that the Governor's Office does not trust local public health to identify and serve individuals in our community who are the most vulnerable," including the homeless, those with mental health issues, and those from minority and immigrant communities.

Kitzmann continued, "By not listening to the voices of those most vulnerable and doing what we can to meet their needs, we are reinforcing messages that those with privilege, such as those with secure employment, reliable transportation, access to technology, and stable housing, come before them. We are reinforcing the message that they cannot rely on or trust our Government or those with power to protect and serve their community."

Encampments have been set up in downtown areas of cities as a visible protest of the inadequate assistance the homeless receive. In Missouri, the *Kansas City Star* reported on an encampment in the Westport district of Kansas City, a major entertainment district. At least 18 people are staying there. Two dozen tents have been set up across from the City Hall since February.

"They don't want to see us, so we went to where they've got to see," 60-year-old James Shelby told the *Kansas City Star* about the purpose of the City Hall encampment. The encampments were formed in the aftermath of the death of local homeless man Scott "Sixx" Eicke, who was found dead on New Year's Day. The Kansas City Police Department is accused of having removed him from an encampment he depended on for survival in winter. Local advocates have formed the Kansas City Homeless Union and the Midwest Homeless Collective to fight for homeless representation.

Adding insult to injury, states have been demanding back thousands of dollars in benefits received by unemployed workers. Katie Powell of St. Charles, Missouri told KSDK News that she was notified in February that she had to pay back nearly \$10,000 of unemployment benefits. She told of how losing these benefits would devastate her family. "They are going to garnish my paychecks to the point that I won't be able to afford childcare to be able to go to work so it's a little backwards. It'll set me back in

a way that I might not be able to recover from.” Powell’s attempts to appeal have been stonewalled, as she could not establish contact with anyone on the state unemployment hotline.

The Missouri Department of Labor and Industrial Relations claims that it overpaid nearly \$96 million in benefits for the period from January through September 2020. Governor Mike Parson has made it clear that the Missouri government will not allow these ‘mistakenly’ deposited funds to remain in recipients’ accounts.

Meanwhile, demand is high for aid from the federal Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP). Missouri’s Greene County, which includes the city of Springfield, with a population of 293,000, saw 1,500 requests for ERAP assistance in the first week of the program’s inception. Greene County received \$9 million of ERAP funding.

Continuum of Care Coordinator for Community Partnership of the Ozarks Amanda Stadler explained to KY3 News how the pandemic affects the homeless and the broader community: “They are more vulnerable to different illnesses or sicknesses whether from underlying health conditions or being in more of a congregate setting maybe.” She confirmed that shelters contribute to people congregating and spreading COVID-19 and other diseases. “Meal sites tend to be congregate. Often, emergency shelters are kind of set up with that model.” Missouri’s homeless residents were only cleared to be given priority for the COVID-19 vaccine on March 29.

Some nonprofits and other organizations have been given vaccines to administer to the homeless, as they have built trusting relationships with their homeless clients over a period of time.

K.K. Assmann, founder of Care Beyond the Boulevard, told KSHB in Kansas City that it is difficult for the homeless to learn of vaccination opportunities. “What we’re seeing is that people who are on the streets are by and large not getting the vaccine, they don’t have access to social media.” If they do know where to get vaccinated, they may not go due to distrust of healthcare organizations. “People who are experiencing homelessness often times have a little bit of a trust issue when it comes to health care organizations, we have built that trust because we’re out here every week, we go to the people.” Assmann has called for organizations that have built on-the-ground connections with homeless individuals to be given vaccines to administer.

St. Louis County, Missouri, the state’s most populous with nearly 1 million residents, has bypassed the federal moratorium and is allowing most evictions to proceed as of April 5. The St. Louis County Circuit Court was already allowing evictions concerning commercial properties and those related to drug crimes and other criminal activity.

St. Louis Public Radio reported that homeless St. Louis residents have been shuffled into inadequate and dangerous housing. At the start of the pandemic, in April 2020, a homeless encampment across from St. Louis City Hall was cleared. Tenants were moved to hotels with documented crime, safety and sanitation problems. Public records show that some tenants suffered violent attacks. Tenants are angry that they are being placed in areas of the city heavy with drug use and crime. There have also been complaints about bedbugs in the hotels.

Hope Center, a homeless shelter for youth, open in December

2020 in Green Bay, Wisconsin, the state’s third largest city, with 104,000 residents. The *Green Bay Press-Gazette* reported that this facility opened because House of Hope, a shelter that at the time was not licensed to house minors, had been receiving two dozen calls a year from schools and social workers asking for placement for young clients.

“That’s why we really started this path. It had happened a couple years in a row and then we just started receiving more and more calls,” Shannon Wienandt, executive director of House of Hope, told the *Press-Gazette*. “We talked to other agencies, and they were telling us they would receive calls as well but didn’t have anywhere to refer homeless youth. There are services that provide outreach, referral, and connection, but not shelter in our community.”

Hope Center is one of the few voluntary shelters for homeless youth in Wisconsin. It has become more difficult to track homeless youth since the pandemic began, with many youth taking classes remotely. It is estimated that as of December 31, Brown County had 68 homeless unaccompanied youth. An estimated 2,300 unaccompanied homeless youth are attending statewide school districts, out of a total homeless youth population of 18,000.

Elsewhere, homelessness has been rising in the state of Nebraska. Since 2019 there was an increase in the homeless population of 1.6 percent, or 39 people, with total 2020 homelessness standing at 2,404. Of these, 143 people are unsheltered, up 33 people from 2019. There are 682 homeless families with children, up 4.9 percent.

Evictions have gone forward across the state throughout 2020 despite the federal protections. Scott Mertz of Legal Aid of Nebraska told KETV Omaha, “We saw the numbers in the data [of eviction filings] creep up particularly late into 2020 as landlords found the ways to circumvent the CDC order.” The Omaha City Council approved \$22.2 million in rental assistance on March 2. Only those who make 80 percent lower than the average area income can qualify. They must also provide proof of citizenship or legal resident status in the United States, and have an existing rental agreement. There is a cap on how many months a person or household can receive city assistance.



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