

The State of Homelessness in Colorado

Luke Maddock

REDI Report – October 2024

<https://redi.colostate.edu/>

Homelessness in Colorado at a Glance (2023):

- 14,439 people experiencing homelessness, up from 9,754 in 2013 and 10,940 in 2017
- 150% increase in chronic homelessness over the past decade (1,780 to 4,457 individuals)
- Significant racial disparities: Black/African American (3x), Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander (14x), and American Indian/Alaska Native (3x) overrepresented compared to general population
- 31-44% of the total homeless population suffer from severe mental illness or chronic substance abuse, and 11% are victims of domestic violence

Homelessness in Colorado, as well as the entire United States, represents one of the most pressing and complex societal challenges that local and state policymakers face. As of 2023, on any given night, over 14,000 Coloradans find themselves without a place to call home, sleeping in shelters, on the streets, or in other places not meant for human habitation.¹ This pervasive problem not only affects individuals and families directly experiencing homelessness but also has far-reaching implications for communities at large.

Not only is homelessness a visible and difficult problem for the state of Colorado, it is a growing one as well. The 2023 count represents a 25% increase in the total number of Coloradans experiencing homelessness in 2017, counted at just below 11,000. Additionally, total homelessness per 10,000 people living in the state grew from 19.48 to 24.57 from 2017 to 2023, indicating 21% growth in the population-controlled estimates. The causes of homelessness are as diverse as they are interconnected. Economic factors, such as poverty, unemployment, and a lack of affordable housing, often play a significant role. The widening gap between wages and housing costs in many urban areas has left an increasing number of individuals and families vulnerable to housing instability. Mental illness and substance abuse disorders, often exacerbated by inadequate access to healthcare and support services, can also contribute to and perpetuate cycles of homelessness.

According to the 2023 Point-in-Time (PIT) count, 14,439 people were experiencing homelessness in Colorado on a single night in January. This represents a 39% increase from 2022, the fourth-largest percentage increase in the country. Chronic homelessness increased by 20% in the last year, and unsheltered homelessness increased by 50%. Over the last ten years, chronic homelessness (a spell of homelessness of at least 1 year) in Colorado increased by 150% (from 1,780 to 4,457 individuals).

Colorado has four Continuums of Care (CoCs), which act as both administrative and geographic entities to centralize efforts between city/county governments and non-profit service providers: Metro Denver Homeless Initiative (MDHI), Northern Colorado, Pikes Peak, and Balance of State. MDHI covers the seven-county Denver metro area, including Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas, and Jefferson counties. Northern Colorado CoC covers Larimer and Weld counties, while Pikes Peak CoC covers El Paso county. The Balance of State CoC encompasses the remaining 54 non-metro and rural counties.

¹ For more information on how counts of people experiencing homelessness are conducted in Colorado, see here: <https://www.mdhi.org/pit>

According to the 2023 PIT count, MDHI reported the largest number of people experiencing homelessness at 10,054, followed by the Balance of State with 2,201, Pikes Peak with 1,302, and Northern Colorado with 882. MDHI also had the highest numbers across subpopulations, reporting 1,726 children under 18, 507 youth aged 18-24, 2,701 people in households with children and adults, 2,964 chronically homeless individuals, and 653 veterans. The Balance of State region, despite having a lower total count, reported the second-highest number of chronically homeless individuals (796) and veterans (207), highlighting the unique challenges faced by rural areas in addressing long-term and veteran homelessness.

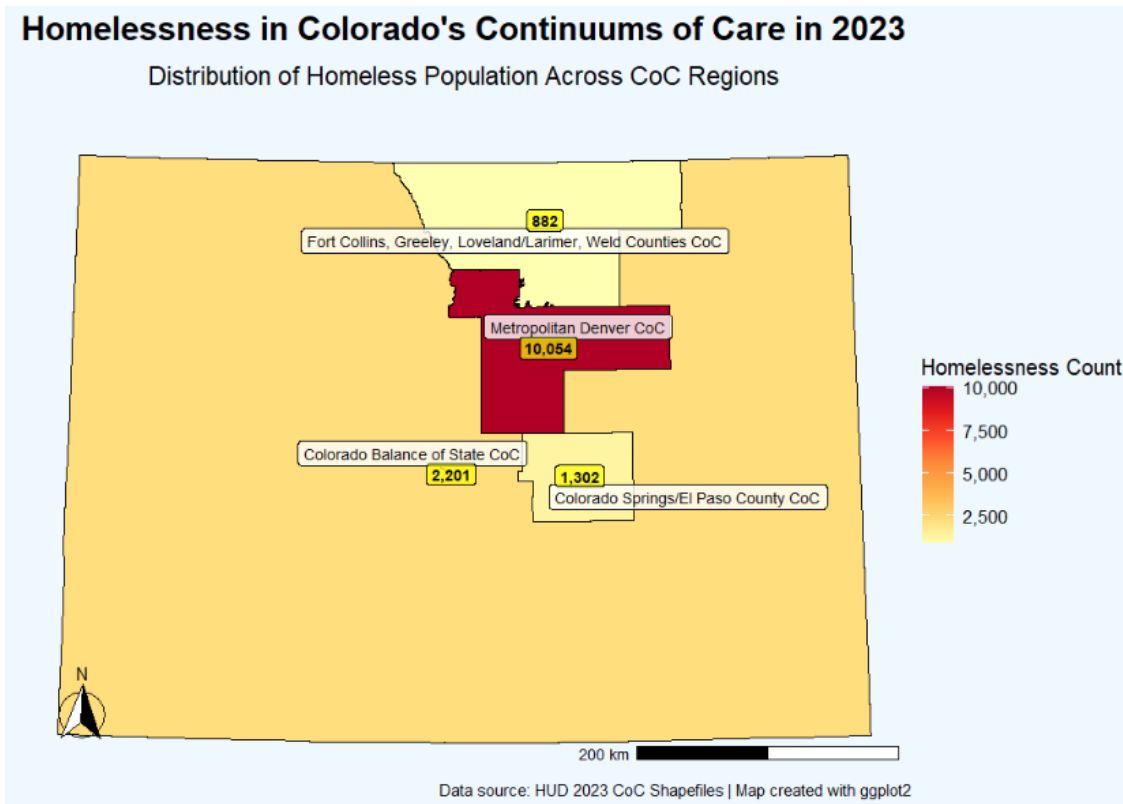


Figure 1: Map of Total Homelessness by Continuums of Care in Colorado, 2023
Source: HUD 2023 Continuum of Care Shapefiles and PIT Count

Mental health issues and substance abuse are significant factors contributing to homelessness. According to the PIT data, 31% of people experiencing homelessness reported a mental health concern, while 24% reported issues with chronic substance abuse. The HMIS data shows even higher rates, with 44% of individuals reporting mental health issues and 43% reporting substance abuse problems. Additionally, domestic violence is another critical issue intersecting with the determinants of people first experiencing homelessness and having difficulty getting out of it. The PIT count found that 1,265 people experiencing homelessness in Colorado reported experiencing domestic violence. This represents about 11% of the total homeless population counted. The reports also highlight significant racial disparities in homelessness. Black or African American Coloradans are more than 3 times overrepresented in the homeless population compared to the general population (17% vs 5%). Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander individuals are 14 times overrepresented, and American Indian/Alaska Native individuals are also more than 3 times overrepresented.

In terms of subpopulations, the data reveals distinct challenges faced by different groups experiencing homelessness. Families represent a significant portion of the homeless population, with 3,641 individuals (25%) experiencing homelessness as part of a household with at least one adult and one child. Alarmingly,

Colorado saw a 69% increase in family homelessness from 2022 to 2023, marking the most significant statewide increase in the nation. Youth homelessness also remains a pressing issue, with 2,291 children under 18 and 771 young adults aged 18-24 experiencing homelessness. Unaccompanied youth face unique challenges, often stemming from family conflicts, aging out of foster care, or identifying as LGBTQ+. Veterans, while benefiting from some targeted interventions, continue to be overrepresented in the homeless population, with 1,022 veterans experiencing homelessness. This group tends to face higher rates of mental health issues and substance abuse compared to non-veteran homeless individuals, highlighting the need for specialized support services.

Colorado utilizes various programs and approaches to address homelessness, each targeting different aspects of the issue. Emergency shelters form the front line of the response, providing immediate, short-term housing to those in crisis. In 2023, there were 358,435 emergency shelter beds available statewide, offering a crucial safety net for many. Transitional housing programs, which offer temporary housing with supportive services for up to 24 months, provided 88,626 beds in 2023, helping individuals and families bridge the gap between homelessness and permanent housing. For those with more complex needs, Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) combines affordable housing with supportive services for individuals with disabilities. This program had 395,986 beds available in 2023, offering a long-term solution for many chronically homeless individuals. The Rapid Re-Housing program, designed to quickly move people into permanent housing with short-term rental assistance and services, provided 144,765 beds in 2023, emphasizing the importance of rapid intervention to prevent prolonged homelessness. Underpinning these various housing options is the Coordinated Entry System, which aims to streamline access to housing and support services, prioritizing those with the highest needs. This system-wide approach helps ensure that resources are allocated efficiently and that individuals are matched with the most appropriate interventions for their specific situations.

References:

Metro Denver Homeless Initiative. (2023). State of homelessness 2023: Adams, Arapahoe, Boulder, Broomfield, Denver, Douglas and Jefferson Counties. <https://mdhi.org/soh-2023>

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2023). Continuum of Care homeless assistance programs homeless populations and subpopulations PIT report.