



Why are people homeless in Seattle? Look upstream



Tents, cars and RVs line Third Avenue South in SoDo on Jan. 17, a chilly, rainy day in Seattle. (Karen Ducey / The Seattle Times)

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The Seattle Times
Feb. 19, 2024

Local headlines around homelessness recently have been even bleaker than usual – and that’s saying a lot.

Some recent headlines include:

[“The private sector’s biggest bet in homelessness fell apart. What now?”](#)

[“King County homelessness authority layoffs result in housing instability”](#)

And tragically, [“Cold weather emergency highlights homelessness system’s flaws”](#)

These stories, largely reported by Seattle Times Project Homeless staff Greg Kim and Anna Patrick, have highlighted our region’s continued failure to address our homelessness crisis. Worse, the grand solutions that were meant to get us on better footing to address the problem have mostly failed.

In 2022, I wrote about one private sector and philanthropy-funded [effort](#) that launched with fanfare to create living wage jobs for those who have direct experience with homelessness and hire them to become “systems advocates” helping people navigate complex bureaucracies. That program collapsed just 1½ years later. The program’s [laid-off staff](#) were again left with housing instability as well as without severance.

The King County Regional Homelessness Authority, the much heralded solution to share the responsibility of addressing homelessness regionally, has been rocked by [problem after problem](#) and its charismatic leader, Marc Dones, [resigned](#) after just two years.

Meanwhile, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, homelessness is [on the rise](#) in the state, a large part due to increases in Seattle and King County.

All of this got me thinking about a saying by South African Bishop Desmond Tutu: “There comes a point where we need to stop just pulling people out of the river. We need to go upstream and find out why they’re falling in.”

I was curious how the U.S. stacked up to other countries when it came to poverty and homelessness.

On the poverty front, the U.S. unsurprisingly ranks [second](#) only to Costa Rica in having the highest poverty rate of the 38 mostly developed democratic countries included in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development list.

By pretty much every measure, the U.S. lags far behind other countries on the list. Fewer people in the U.S. have health insurance; support for people with disabilities is much poorer; and support for unemployment is lower. For those trying to raise children in the U.S.: good luck. The U.S. is the only country on the list without guaranteed [paid leave](#) for new parents. Denmark, meanwhile, offers 52 weeks of parental leave to be shared by parents after birth or adoption. What do these social safety net programs have to do with homelessness? A lot.

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, two key [drivers](#) of homelessness are lack of affordable housing and poverty.

In places like Seattle, where Axios reported the housing cost index is more than [double](#) the national average and the city overall had the ninth highest cost of living in the country in late 2023, you can’t talk about homelessness without talking about the many ways we let people fall through the economic cracks.

But what about the role of mental illness and drug addiction in driving homelessness, you might ask?

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 21% of people experiencing homelessness [reported](#) having a serious mental illness and 16% reported having a substance use disorder. Homelessness can also drive addiction.

For me, what this all adds up to is that our current efforts to address homelessness here are a lot like moving the deck chairs on the Titanic.

We can pat ourselves on the back for our latest shiny solution but ultimately, the fundamental problem will remain unchanged in our city: The rent is just too damn high for people to make it.

Yes, I am well aware that a country that thinks even universal health care is socialist overreach is nowhere close to having the political will to fundamentally change our approach to providing for our citizens' basic needs. But I don't think we can address a problem if we can't even name what it is.

During the first years of the pandemic, the U.S. actually leaned [hard](#) into programs to prevent individuals and companies from economic catastrophe, but those efforts ended right along with masking protocols.

In some parts of our city, we aren't too far from looking like the [Hoovervilles](#) of the 1930s. Yet we have normalized our safety net made of Swiss cheese and keep chasing after the fickle benevolence of billionaires.

Yes, it will cost more on the front end – as it did during COVID – to prevent vulnerable people from slipping into homelessness. It will cost more to create an adequate stock of affordable housing, to provide rental subsidies for people on the brink, and provide cash support for low-income parents and people with disabilities, among other support, but it will save lives and generational harm in the long run.

Now that our national experiment is a couple of hundred years old, it's time we started acting like a grown-up country that actually provides for the fundamental needs of all its people.

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