

Homelessness in Greater Boston

Trends in the Context of Our Broader Housing Crisis

August 2024

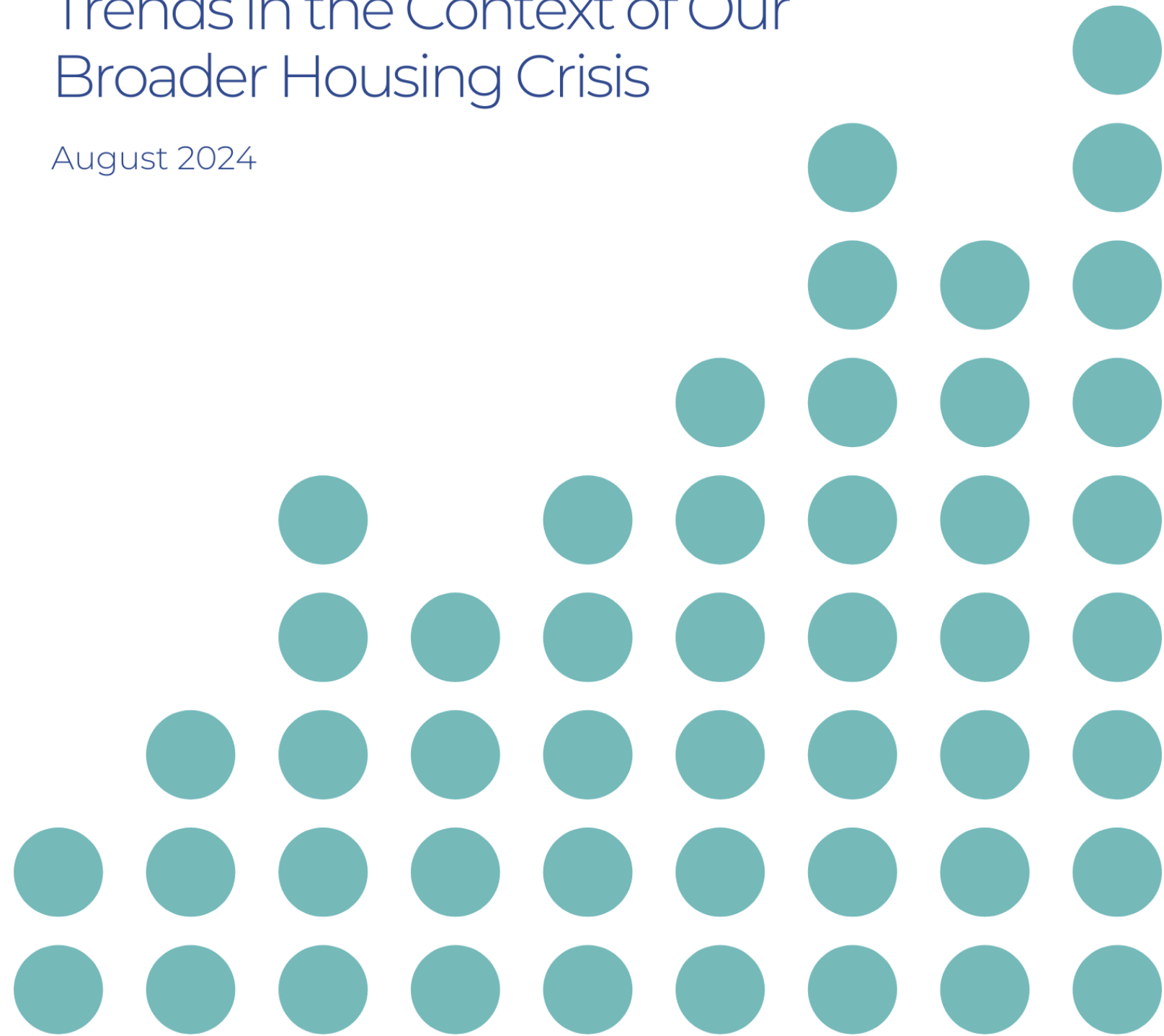


Table of Contents

Page 2	Overview & Key Findings
Page 4	How many people are homeless in Greater Boston and what are the recent trends?
Page 9	Who, specifically, is falling into homelessness?
Page 15	How does Greater Boston's housing shortage contribute to higher rates of homelessness?
Page 19	Conclusion

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Overview & Key Findings

The public's perception of homelessness in Greater Boston often centers on visible encampments at locations such as Mass & Cass and the recent influx of immigrant families in need of support from the state's shelter system. These issues are real, but they represent only a portion of the broader and more complex story of homelessness in our region.

Factors usually associated with homelessness include substance use, mental health challenges, poverty, and a history of incarceration. While these factors increase the risk of homelessness at the individual level, they cannot explain population-level trends in homelessness. After all, Greater Boston has similar, and often lower, rates of these factors than many other U.S. regions. But we still experience much higher rates of homelessness. What is different, however, is our region's severe shortage of affordable market-rate housing, limiting the ability of people of more modest means to find decent housing without public support.

So, in this new analysis, we take a deep dive into the data on homelessness in Greater Boston, attempting to answer the following research questions:

How many people are homeless in Greater Boston and what are the recent trends?

Greater Boston has very high rates of homelessness. While we aren't back to our 2014 peak, homelessness has been rising, with an especially large increase in 2023. Other key findings from this section include:

- Fortunately, a large share of those experiencing homelessness in Greater Boston are living in some sort of shelter. Among large U.S. cities, Boston has the second highest rate of homelessness but also the eighth lowest rate of unsheltered homelessness. Only 6 percent of the region's homeless population is unsheltered, far below the national average of 40 percent. Thanks to our robust shelter system and related support services, chronic homelessness in Greater Boston is also less than half the national average.
- Other measures of extreme housing instability are also up. Residential overcrowding, for instance, is up 55 percent since 2006.

Who, specifically, is falling into homelessness?

While bouts of homelessness can happen to anyone, those who experience homelessness are usually the most vulnerable members of our society. Specific to Greater Boston we find that:

- Most unhoused people are in family units; 70 percent of Greater Boston's homeless population is in families compared to only 28 percent nationwide.
- Greater Boston has been relatively welcoming to recent immigrant arrivals. These families come seeking opportunity but often wait six months to a year before they can obtain work permits. Consequently, the number of families seeking state-assisted shelter has more than doubled in the past two years. Many of these are recent immigrants.
- Black residents are far more likely to experience homelessness in Greater Boston than people of other races. A portion of the recent increase in Black homelessness is likely due to Haitian refugees fleeing political and economic instability in their home country. Latino homelessness is also high but remains lower than Black homelessness. White and Asian homelessness is far lower still.

How does Greater Boston's housing shortage contribute to higher rates of homelessness?

Over the past few decades Greater Boston has built a thriving, growing economy, which creates numerous and varied opportunities for longstanding residents and newcomers alike. But we haven't built enough housing to meet the needs of everyone who wants to live here, resulting in higher rents and leading to higher rates of homelessness than other metro areas with less expensive housing options.

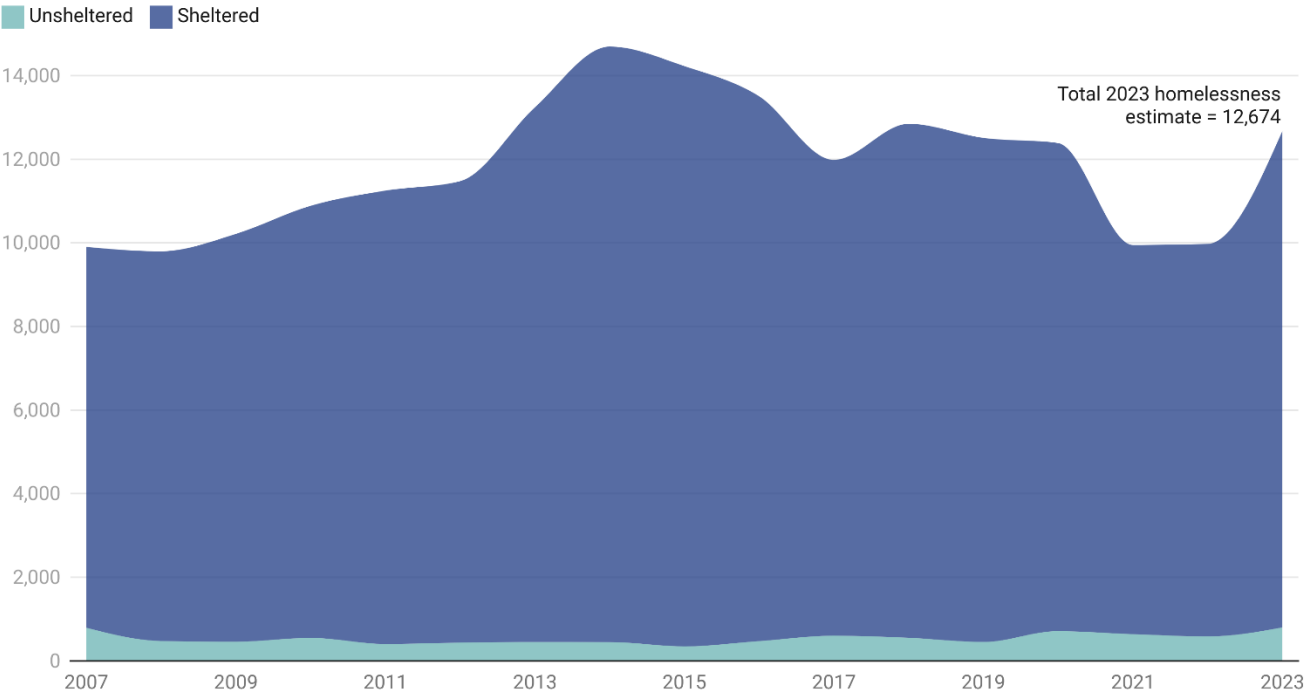
The fact that we are the only state with a Right-To-Shelter law for families experiencing homelessness (though New York City is also required to provide shelter), no doubt makes it more likely that people in need of support, including newly arriving immigrants, will step forward where otherwise they might not. But the far larger issue is the broader dysfunction in our housing market, leading to very few low-cost housing options. This scarcity of housing impacts all segments of the population but disproportionately affects those with existing disadvantages, such as medical issues, mental illness, substance use disorders, or a history of incarceration.

How many people are homeless in Greater Boston and what are the recent trends?

For years, Greater Boston has had among the highest rates of homelessness of any major metro area in the country. The latest data for 2023 show a large spike in homelessness nationwide, with a roughly 27 percent increase in Greater Boston from 2022 to 2023. Because people live, work and play regionally, rather than being confined to just one municipality—and because homelessness supports tend to be concentrated in a few select urban areas—we prefer to analyze these trends at the regional level, as we do in the graph below.

Homelessness remains elevated in Greater Boston, but the vast majority are living in shelters.

Point-in-time counts of people experiencing homelessness.



Note: Two of Greater Boston's Continuums of Care performed only partial counts in 2021, potentially leading to lower counts overall.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: HUD Point-in-Time Counts • Created with Datawrapper

These graphs, and much of the analysis in this report, rely on annual Point-in-Time (PIT) counts coordinated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). These rough

estimates combine counts of people living in homeless shelters with those of unsheltered homeless people one night per year, typically in January. Both counts are conducted by Continuums of Care (CoCs), which are local planning bodies made up of nonprofit and government entities that develop plans to address homelessness and coordinate homelessness supports,

While the PIT count is the best uniform data we have on homelessness, it's almost certainly a low estimate. It takes place on one single day of the year, so it misses people who were recently homeless, but not at that precise moment. And because the count happens during the winter month of January, it occurs at a time when more people double up with friends and family temporarily even though they do not have anything approaching stable housing. The winter timing of the PIT count is especially problematic for cold-climate regions such as Greater Boston.

But these are the best estimates we have, and they allow for comparisons over time. Ultimately, what they show is that homelessness in Greater Boston¹ began to rise in 2008 following the Great Recession, climbing steadily from about 10,000 people in 2008 to an inflection point of almost 15,000 people in 2014. This peak in 2014 was due to people staying in shelter longer, the addition of new shelter units, and the growth of hotel and motel use during that time-period, making it easier for the PIT count to capture more people experiencing homelessness. Greater Boston's PIT count declined to nearly pre-recession levels in 2021, likely due partially to [pandemic-era regulations](#) that provided additional benefits to low-income families and to poor quality data from 2021. That year, two of Greater Boston's CoCs performed only partial counts, potentially leading to lower counts overall. Homelessness counts spiked back up in 2023 when these regulations ended and all regional CoCs returned to completing full counts. A little under 13,000 people were reported to be experiencing homelessness in Greater Boston on the night of the 2023 PIT count.

While Greater Boston has one of the highest rates of homelessness, it also has a relatively low rate of unsheltered homelessness (including living on the street, in a car, or in an encampment). Precise comparisons across regions are challenging because CoC geographies vary widely and do not uniformly align with metro areas. This discrepancy complicates comparative analysis, as homelessness operates at a regional level. Many individuals experiencing homelessness travel to urban areas to access support services and shelters, given that many suburbs resist the placement of such programs. For example, local officials in Boston and Lynn report that a significant portion of their homeless populations originated from other areas to access services. Due to these data

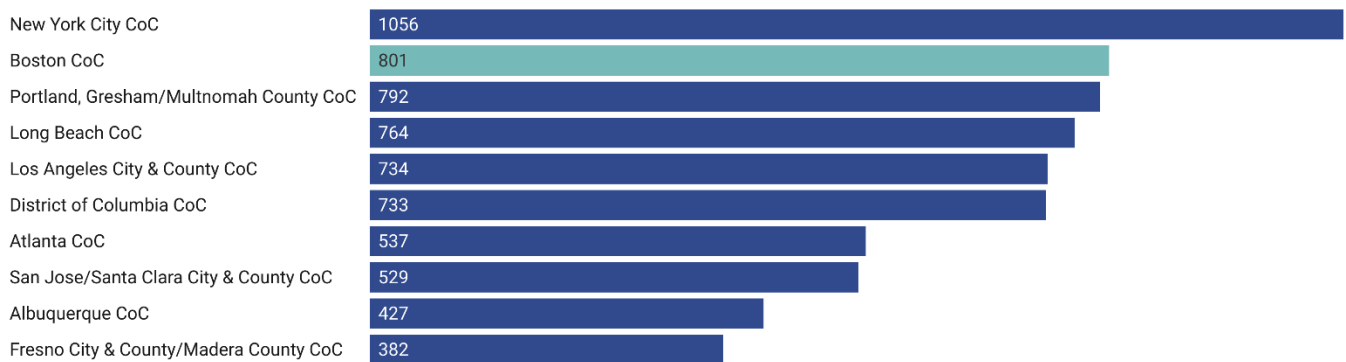
1 CoC's can be entirely within cities or cover wide areas across many different municipalities. The Greater Boston five-county area includes five CoC's: Boston CoC, Cambridge CoC, Lynn CoC, Quincy, Brockton, Weymouth, Plymouth City and County CoC, and the Massachusetts Balance of State CoC covering the rest of Greater Boston.

limitations, we focus on the city of Boston and compare it to the most equivalent city-level CoCs, which often align with city boundaries, but not always.

Using estimates from the [Brookings Institute](#), which did the work of aligning CoC's with ACS population estimates for those geographies, we see that Boston's homelessness rate is the second highest in the country, eclipsed only by the New York City CoC. Boston's rate places it in the company of several Western CoCs, such as Portland, Oregon and Los Angeles, California—which are often the face of homelessness in the U.S. And what all these cities have in common is low housing production leading to high home prices and rents.

Large U.S. cities with the highest homelessness rates.

Top 10 homelessness rates per 100,000 residents among the 45 largest U.S. cities or Continuums of Care. 2023.

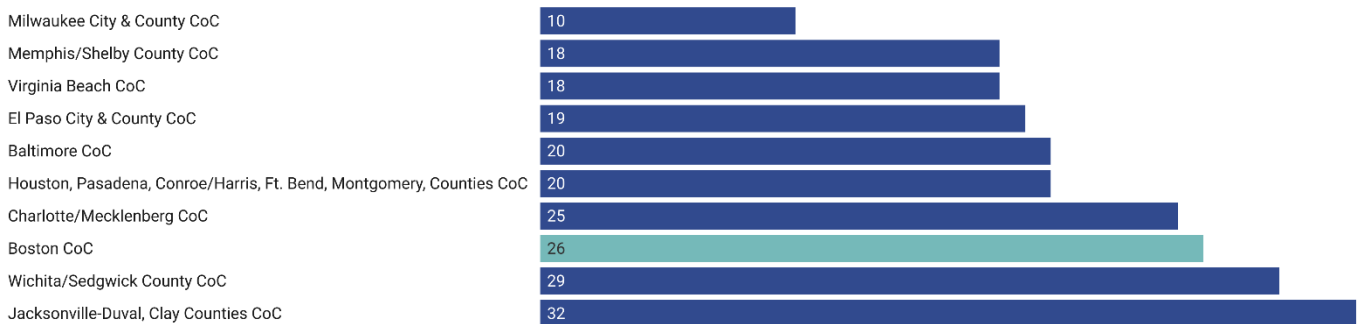


Note: Based directly off of Brookings Institute homelessness rate estimates, which align CoCs PIT counts with ACS population estimates for those geographies.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Brookings Institute • Created with Datawrapper

Large U.S. cities with the lowest unsheltered homeless rates.

Lowest 10 unsheltered homeless rates per 100,000 residents among the 45 largest U.S. cities or Continuums of Care. 2023.



Based off of Brookings Institute estimates of unsheltered homelessness, which align CoC's PIT counts with ACS population estimates for those geographies.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Brookings Institute • Created with Datawrapper

Unlike these West Coast cities, however, Boston's sheltered homeless rate is significantly higher than most other CoCs—again, except for the New York City CoC. This means that while Boston has high rates of people experiencing homelessness, more of these people have shelter in the region (e.g. living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, or safe havens) than in the vast majority of

other U.S. cities. While this is positive news, it's undeniable that too many people experience homelessness in Greater Boston and far better would be if all of those people had access to decent housing on their own terms rather than through the state's shelter system.

Indeed, both Boston and Greater Boston's unsheltered populations stand in sharp contrast to many of the country's largest cities and regions. Just six percent of Greater Boston and 3 percent of Boston CoC's homeless population is *unsheltered*. This is well below the [national](#) share of 40 percent and West Coast cities, such as Los Angeles and Seattle, where unsheltered homelessness accounts for 73 percent and 54 percent of their homeless populations respectively.

Low housing production paired with low provision of shelter results in the most dire of situations. So, while cities like Boston and New York have high rates of homelessness, at the very least we're providing shelter for most people. What Boston—actually, the entire state of Massachusetts—and New York City have in common is they're both “right to shelter” jurisdictions, which means they are [required to provide shelter](#) under specific circumstances. The Massachusetts law has traditionally guaranteed shelter for families with children and pregnant women.

It's important to note, however, that in response to the surge in demand for shelter coming from new immigrant arrivals, the Massachusetts guarantee has been scaled back in a few different ways over the past two years. We discuss these changes in more detail below, but the state recently added caps on shelter capacity and length of stay. These new restrictions could lead rates of unsheltered homelessness to rise as the housing market continuously fails to provide enough housing.

Directly connected to the lack of decent low-cost housing options is residential [overcrowding](#), which is an indicator of extreme housing instability. The graph below looks at growth in the number of rental units with more than one occupant per room in Greater Boston, showing these have more than doubled since 2006. Individuals and families living in overcrowded residences aren't counted as homeless technically but are clearly living in far from ideal situations and their housing instability puts them among the most at risk of falling into homelessness. Similar to experiences of homelessness, overcrowding comes with its own troubling experiences that can cause people to lose a sense of dignity. For example, many people in overcrowded housing live under informal sublet arrangements that do not provide standard tenant protections, leaving their housing to the whims of their hosts. A [recent study](#) of California's homelessness population found that half of people experiencing homelessness didn't hold a lease before their entry to homelessness, demonstrating how this type of precarious housing can be a precursor to homelessness.

Overcrowding has risen over time in Greater Boston.

Count of overcrowded rental units (i.e. units with more than one person per room) with low to high estimate range.

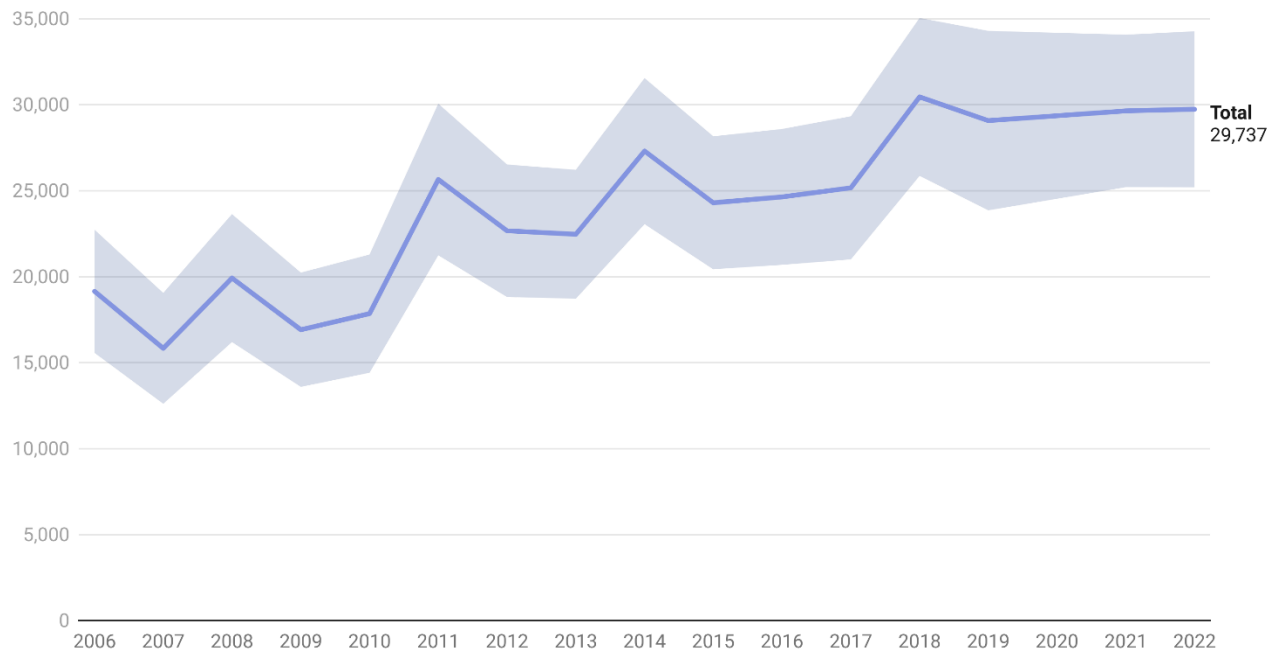


Chart: Boston Indicators. • Source: 2006-2022 American Community Survey. IPUMS University of Minnesota. www.ipums.org. • Created with Datawrapper

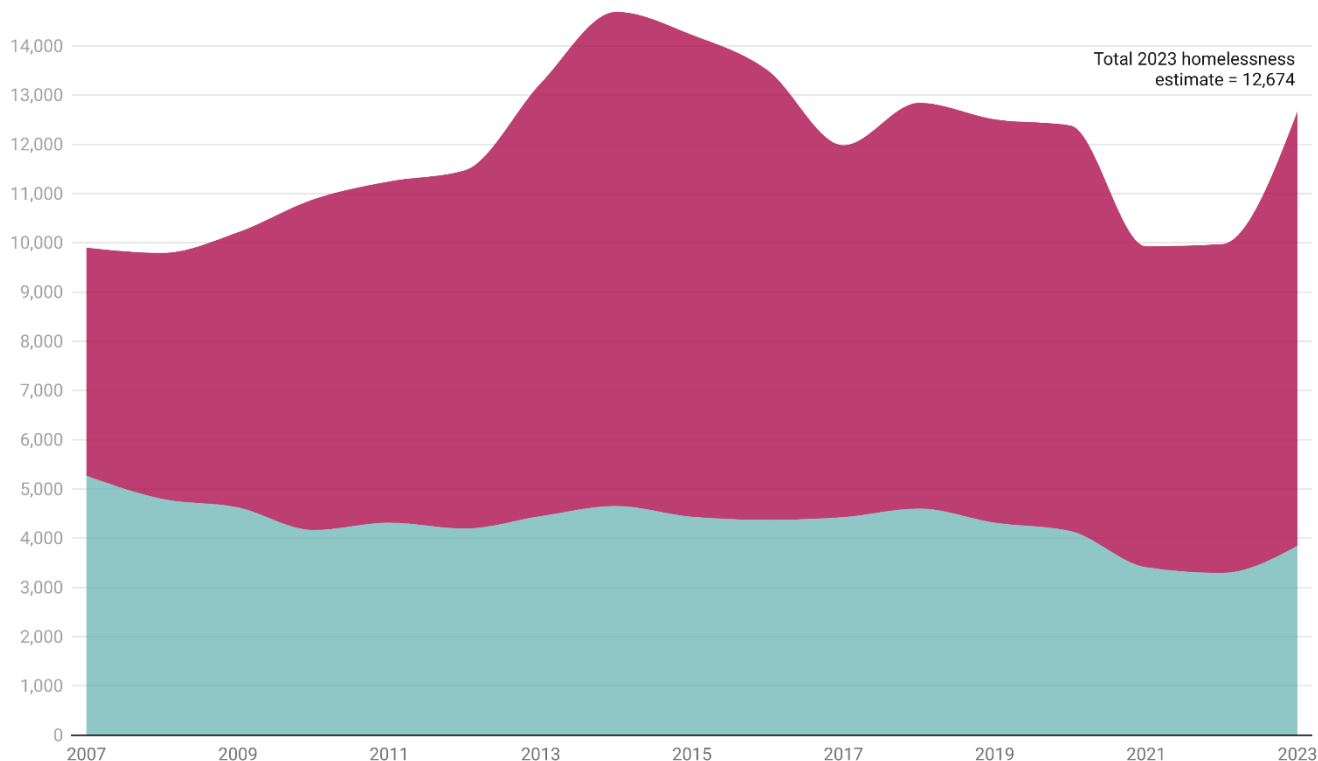
Who, specifically, is falling into homeless?

Unlike most of the country, the majority of unhoused people in Greater Boston are in family units, with individuals accounting for much smaller shares. In 2023, people experiencing homelessness were more than twice as likely to be in families as they were to be individuals. Of the estimated 12,674 people who were homeless in 2023, 70 percent were in families. This contrasts with [national figures](#), where about three-quarters of all people experiencing homelessness are individuals, and the share of family homelessness has been declining since 2012.

Families make up almost two-thirds of Greater Boston's homeless population.

Point-in-time counts of people experiencing homelessness.

■ Individuals ■ People in Families



Note: Two of Greater Boston's Continuums of Care performed only partial counts in 2021, potentially leading to lower counts overall.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: HUD Point-in-Time Counts • Created with Datawrapper

Right to shelter jurisdictions, including Massachusetts and New York City, tend to have higher rates of [family homelessness](#) because families are guaranteed housing. These jurisdictions expand their

shelter capacity to accommodate families in need and consequently have a greater proportion of families in their homeless population than other jurisdictions.

Families Receiving Emergency Housing by Type.

Number of families receiving state-funded Emergency Assistance, by type of placement.

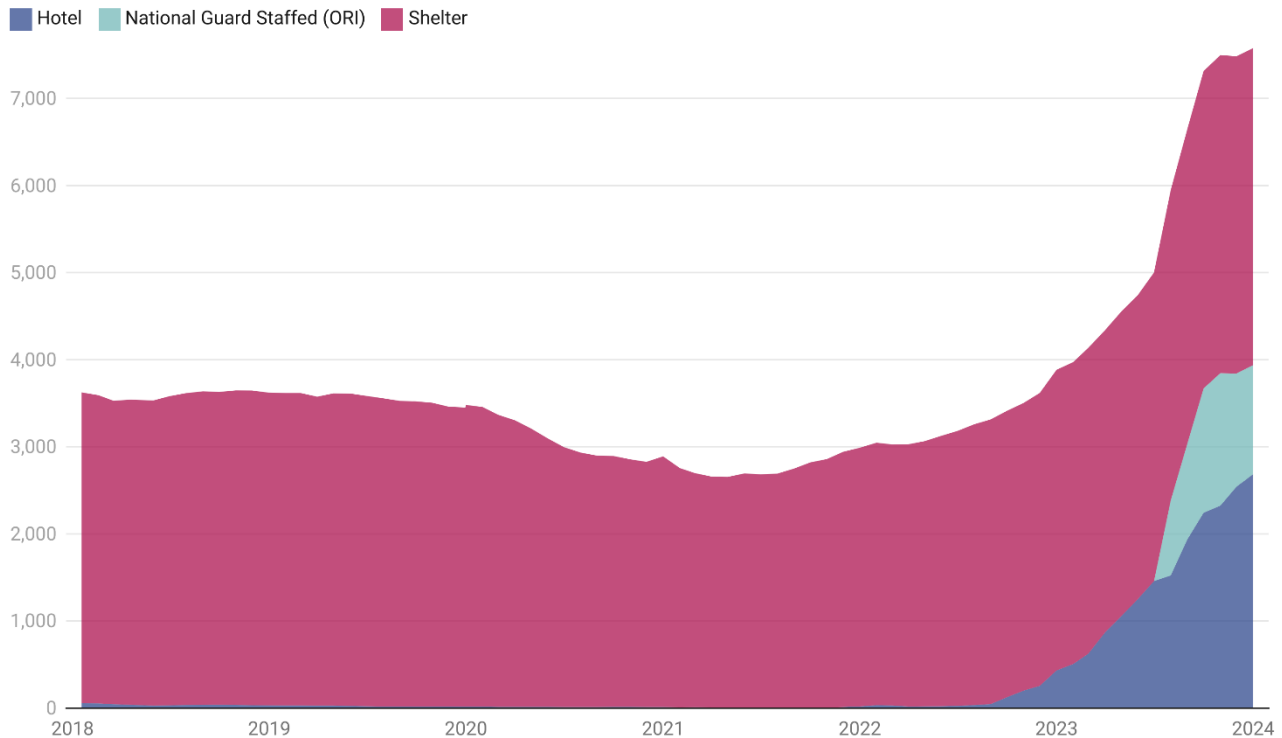


Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities. • Created with Datawrapper

Housing and shelter have long been in high demand in the Greater Boston region and in recent years, the arrival of immigrant families—who often arrive with nowhere to go and wind up in the [emergency shelter system](#)—has contributed to the rising rates of family homelessness in Greater Boston. The graph above, which uses data on family cases from the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC), shows the recent rise in family cases in the emergency shelter system that coincided with the arrival of many immigrant families to the Greater Boston region. In response to the increased demand for shelter, in mid-2022, the state again started relying heavily on hotel rooms for families, and in 2023, it began sheltering families in facilities staffed by the [National Guard](#).

This rapid increase has stressed the state’s shelter system and led to tough political debates around scaling-back the right-to-shelter law. In a [July 2024 statement](#), for instance, Governor Healy wrote: “We have been saying for months now that the rapid growth of our Emergency Assistance shelter system is not sustainable. Massachusetts is out of shelter space, and we simply cannot afford the

current size of this system.” Ultimately the state has scaled-back the right-to-shelter law in a few key ways over the past year:

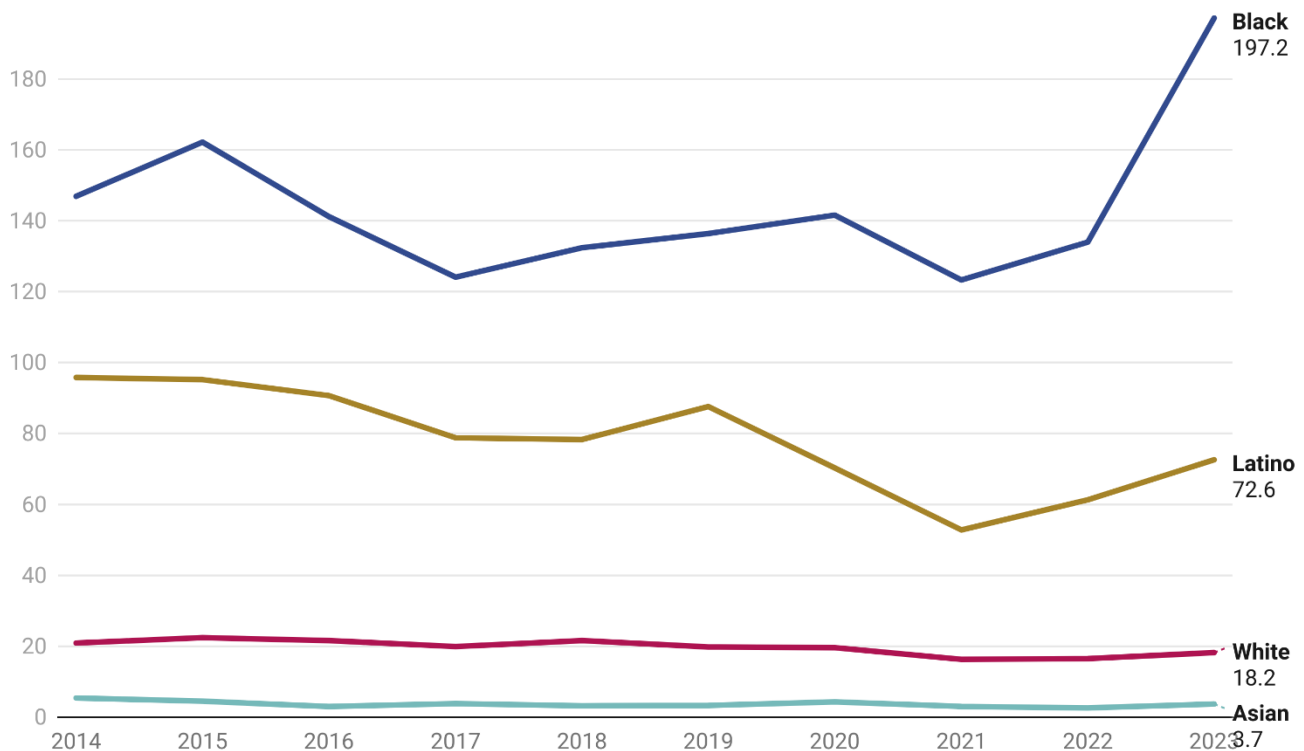
1. In October 2023, the state [capped the provision of emergency shelter](#) to 7,500 families, which is where the EOHLC count will inevitably flatline. Subsequently, the EOHLC data won't account for the families who are denied shelter and, therefore, the EOHLC data should be considered a floor for the count of families in need of emergency housing.
2. In April 2024, the state created a [9-month time limit](#) for families staying in the emergency shelter system, whereas there had been no time limit previously.
3. In July 2024, the state started limiting stays in overflow sites to five days. It also added to an existing priority list for permanent shelter spots families with veterans, families who become unhoused due to no-fault evictions, and families who become unhoused by natural disasters. While these changes to the priority list don't directly target international migrants, they clearly prioritize longer standing Massachusetts residents over new arrivals.

With these new restrictions, particularly the cap limiting shelter to 7,500 families, the 2024 figures will likely underrepresent the total need for emergency housing. And over time this could lead to an increase in unsheltered homelessness in Greater Boston.

Disaggregating homelessness data by race, we see that Black residents have consistently had disproportionately higher rates, totaling an estimated 6,647 people in 2023. While Black residents make up only eight percent of Greater Boston's total population, they account for over half (52 percent) of its unhoused population.

Greater Boston's Black residents consistently experience far higher rates of homelessness.

Rate of homelessness per 10,000 people by race.



Note: 2020 and 2023 per-capita rates are calculated using the previous year's population totals (2019 and 2022).

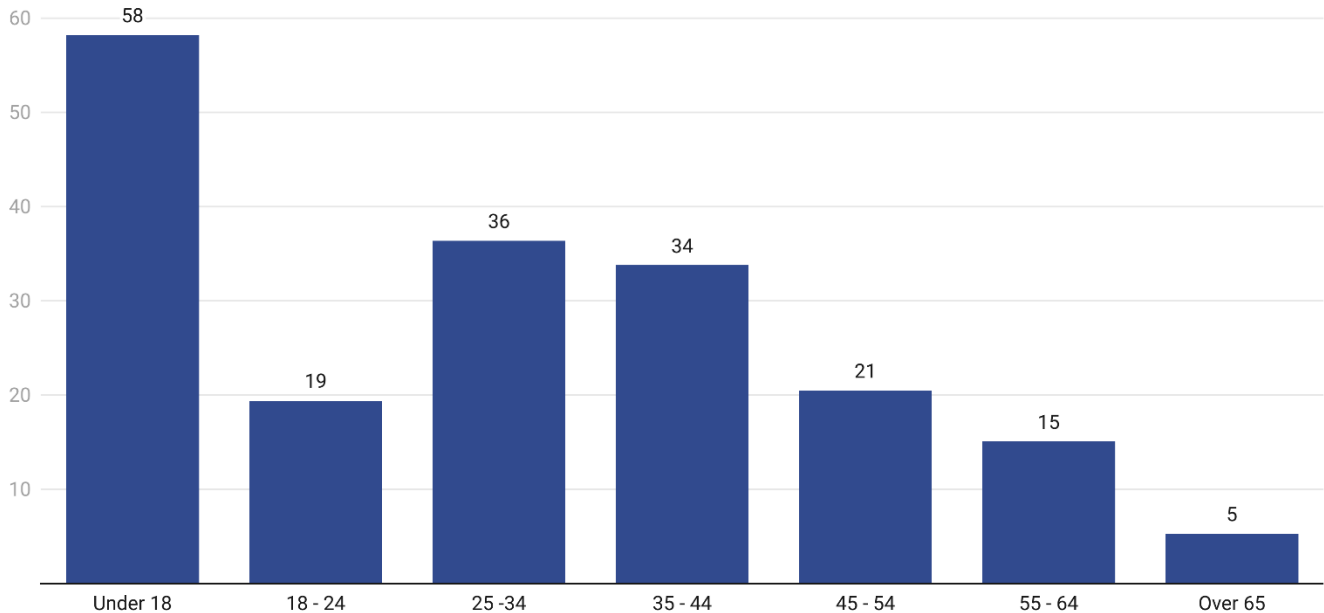
Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: HUD Point-in-Time Count, 1-Yr ACS. • Created with Datawrapper

Not only has homelessness among Black residents been consistently higher than for other groups, it has also spiked in recent years. It's likely that this spike is related to the increase in Haitian immigrants who arrive with no housing and find themselves homeless, although it's hard to know how much of the recent increase is explained by this new development. Latinos also have a high rate of homelessness, but their rates are still considerably lower than those of the Black population. Meanwhile, White and Asian populations have consistently had much lower rates of homelessness.

When we look at homelessness by age, youth under the age of 18 experience homelessness at the highest rates by far, accounting for 31 percent of Greater Boston's homeless population. In 2023, youth under 18 experienced homelessness at a rate of 58 people per 10,000 compared to 36 people among the 25 to 34 age group, the age group with the next highest rate. The under 18 age group includes both youth who are members of families experiencing homelessness and unaccompanied youth who are experiencing individual homelessness.

Youth under 18 experience homelessness at far higher rates.

Rate of homelessness per 10,000 people. Greater Boston. 2023.



Note: No differentiation between unaccompanied youth and youth under 18. Per capita calculated based on 2022 American Community Survey population data due to availability.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: 2023 HUD Point-in-Time Count, 2022 1-yr ACS • Created with Datawrapper

The fact that family homelessness accounts for the vast majority of homelessness in Greater Boston likely explains why the under 18 age group is so large. What's more, national reporting under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act indicates that 76 percent of K-12 students without permanent housing live in overcrowded housing, meaning there are likely many more children and youth under 18 living on the brink of homelessness.

Females also experience homelessness at slightly higher rates than males in Greater Boston, with females experiencing homelessness at a rate of 30 per 10,000 and males at a rate of 27 per 10,000. This diverges from the national trend of males experiencing higher rates of homelessness than females and likely relates to Greater Boston's high rates of families experiencing homelessness, many of which are likely female-led.

Nationally, veteran homelessness has rapidly trended downward since 2009, declining 55 percent in the intervening years. Greater Boston saw a 62 percent decline in veteran homelessness between 2011 to 2023, declining from 742 to 279 veterans experiencing homelessness. This is because of [special programs](#) designed to keep veterans out of homelessness and rapidly re-house them when they do fall into homelessness, demonstrating that when we choose to do so we, as a society, can effectively reduce homelessness.

Greater Boston also has a comparatively low rate of chronic homelessness—people who have experienced homelessness for at least a year or repeatedly while dealing with a disability such as mental illness, substance use disorder, or a physical disability. [Nationally](#), 22 percent of the homeless population is chronically homeless, compared to only 9 percent in Greater Boston. This is likely due to Massachusetts’ right to shelter law and more robust shelter system and supports, especially permanent supportive housing offered through places like Pine Street Inn that provides on-site health, job training, and behavioral health supports.

Chronic homelessness is less common in Massachusetts and Greater Boston than nationally.

Chronically homeless share of total homeless population. 2023.

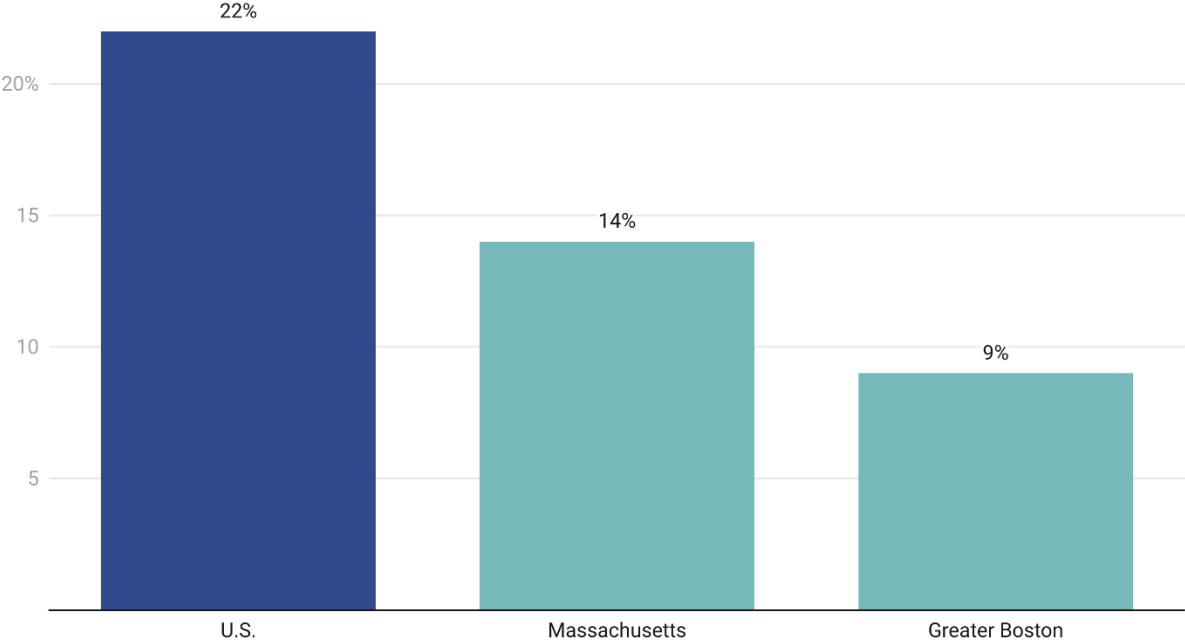


Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: HUD Point-in-Time Counts 2023 • Created with Datawrapper

How does Greater Boston's housing shortage contribute to higher rates of homelessness?

While homelessness may have myriad causes at the individual and family level—including substance use, mental health challenges, poverty, incarceration, [poor housing condition](#) or domestic violence—these cannot explain population-level trends in homelessness. After all, Greater Boston has similar, and often lower, rates of these factors than many other U.S. regions. But we still experience much higher rates of homelessness. What is different, however, is our region's severe shortage of affordable market-rate housing, limiting the ability of people of more modest means to find decent housing without public support.

A useful analogy to understand the relationship between housing and homelessness is the game of musical chairs. At the start of the game, there are enough chairs for all participants. But as the game progresses and chairs are removed, those with impairments—a broken leg, say—struggle to find a chair before the music stops. This isn't a perfect analogy of course. In Greater Boston, for instance, we don't even have enough homes (i.e. chairs) at the outset of the game. But it helps shed some light on the underlying dynamics.

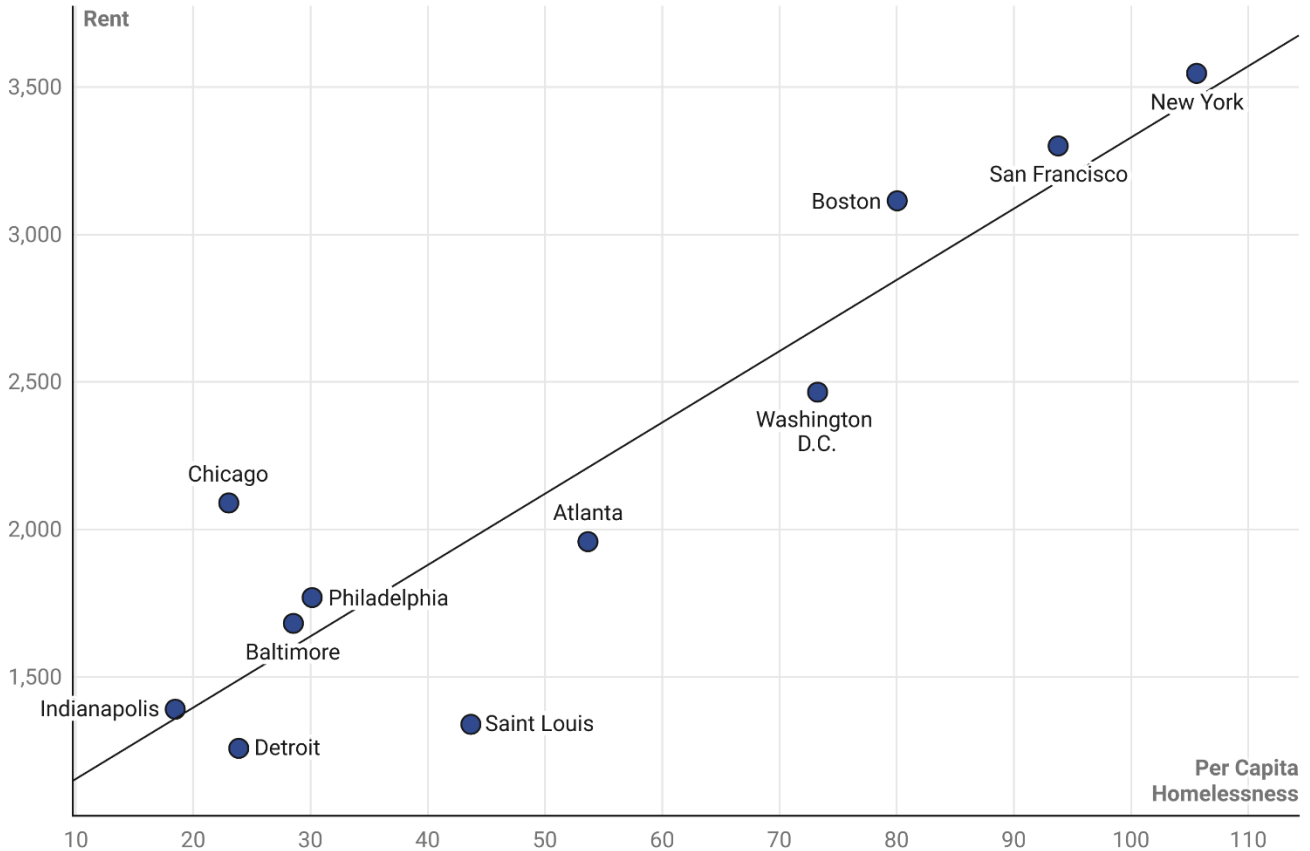
Despite broader housing market conditions being the central cause of homelessness, far too many people don't make this obvious connection, including politicians. Indicative of this problem, the Initiative on Cities at the University of Boston has run the Menino Survey of Mayors for years, designed to understand the ways that American mayors view the issues and challenges facing their cities. In 2021, the survey asked about barriers to [addressing homelessness](#). It found that mayors were worried most about funding for short-term needs related to people currently experiencing homelessness. On the one hand, this makes good sense, as mayors are responsible for addressing immediate needs like this. On the other hand, the survey findings revealed a far less long-term, structural view. Indeed, only about one-quarter of mayors noted that zoning and land use regulations were barriers to addressing homelessness, suggesting that many mayors are not connecting long-term housing market issues with their near-term homelessness challenges.

So, building on the extensive body of research that has already found strong connections between homelessness and measures housing market disfunction (well catalogued, for instance, in Pew's [How Housing Costs Drive Levels of Homelessness](#) and Colburn & Aldern's [Homelessness is a Housing Problem](#)), let's look at some of this data for Greater Boston relative to the rest of the country.

The strength of the association may vary, but higher rents and home prices appear tied to higher rates of homelessness for some of the largest city-based Continuums of Care (used here for continuity of city-CoC borders). Across both measures, higher cost cities have higher homelessness rates. The City of Boston features prominently, with some of the highest rates of per-capita homelessness, rents and home values.

Cities with higher rents have higher homelessness.

Central Cities of Largest Metros with Continuums of Care. 2023.

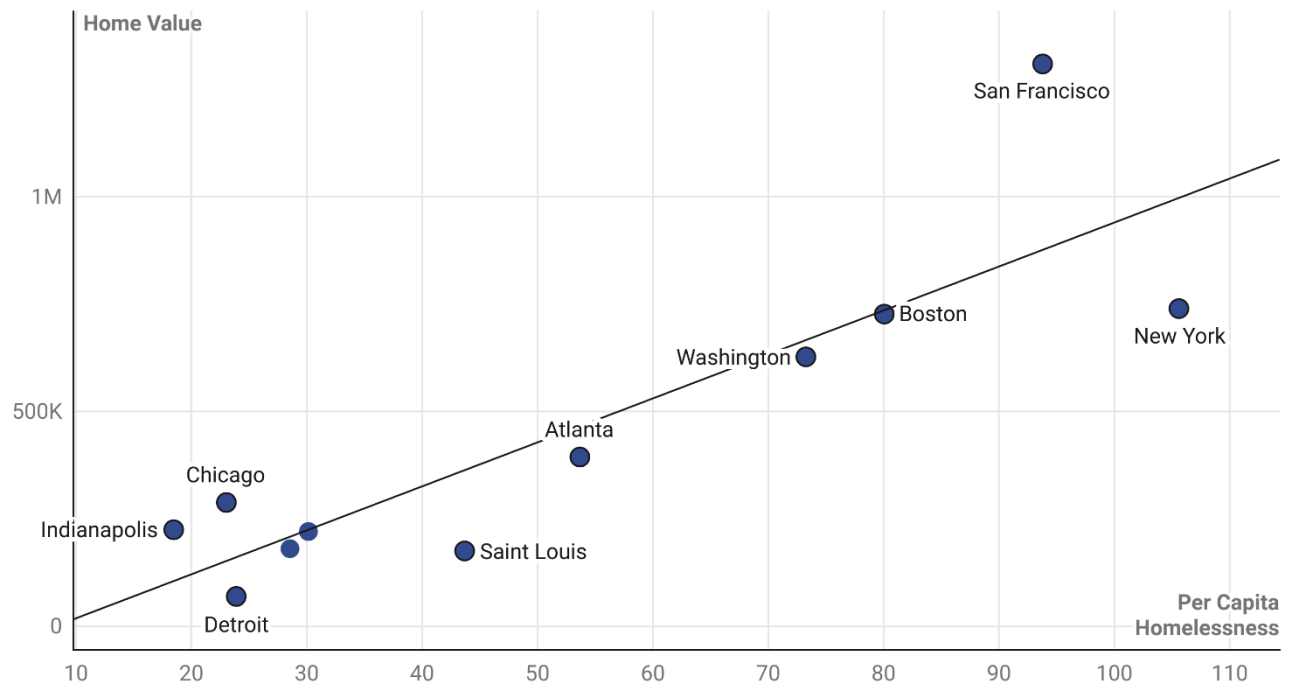


Note: Rent is the monthly average of Zillow Observed Rent Index, across Jan - Dec 2023. Per Capita homelessness rates are calculated using 2022 1-Yr ACS population totals.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Zillow Observed Rent Index, HUD PIT Count, 2022 1-Yr American Community Survey • Created with Datawrapper

Cities with higher home values have higher homelessness.

Central Cities of Largest Metros with Continuums of Care. 2023.



Note: Home value is monthly values of the Zillow Home Value Index, averaged across Jan - Dec 2023. Per capita homelessness rates are calculated using 2022 1-Yr ACS population totals.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: Zillow Home Value Index. HUD PIT Count. 2022 1-Yr American Community Survey • Created with Datawrapper

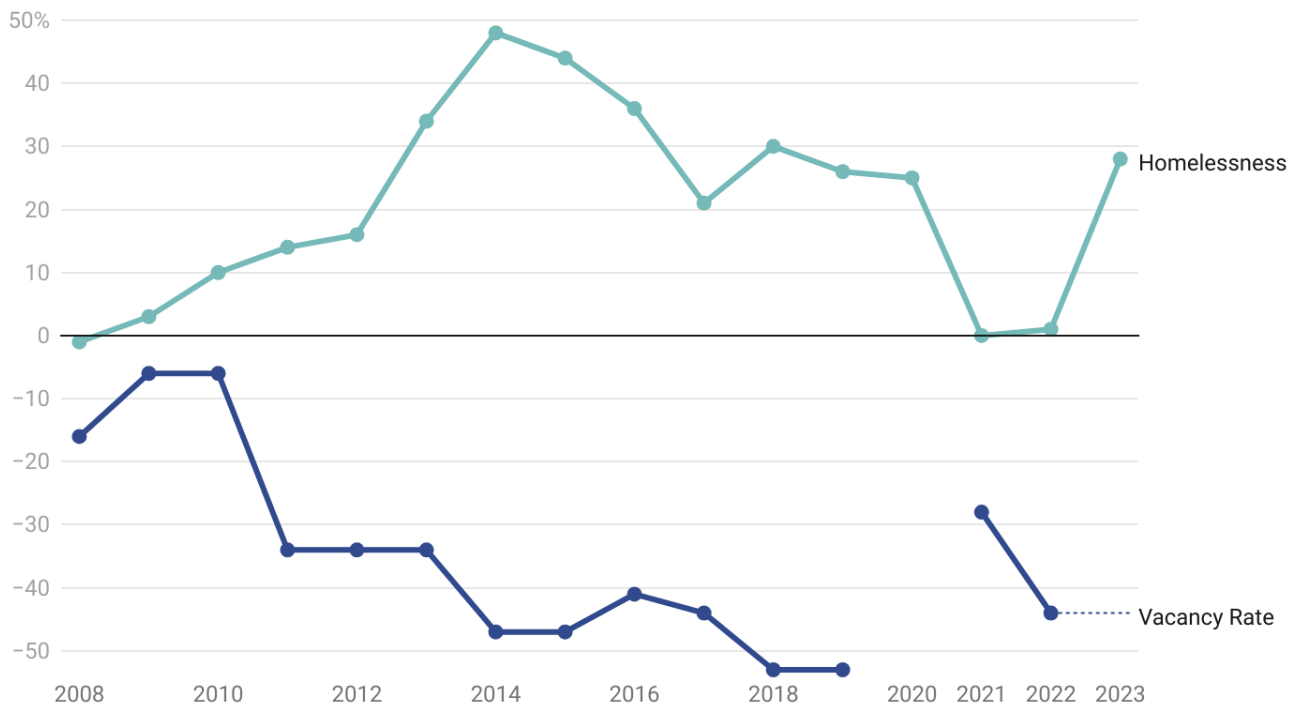
These also help make the point that housing is the dominant through-line. On many other statistics—including disability status (such as mental health), poverty, or opioid related deaths—Boston is level with or outperforms other cities.

Of course, one of the reasons that housing is so expensive is that we simply don't have enough homes for all the families that want to live in Greater Boston, leading to extremely [low rental vacancy rates](#). Homeowner vacancy rates are also very low in our region, but as rental housing is the more accessible option for lower-income families, the analysis below looks at the relationship between rental vacancy rates and homelessness over time.

And it reveals a remarkable negative relationship. As rental vacancies decline—that is, as there are fewer units available to rent—homelessness tends to increase. And as vacancies increase, homelessness tends to drop.

Homelessness tends to increase as rental vacancy rates decrease.

Percent change in homelessness and rental vacancy rates from 2007. Greater Boston.



Note: We exclude the 2020 vacancy rate due to data limitations with the American Community Survey. We do not yet have 2023 vacancy rates.

Chart: Boston Indicators • Source: PIT Estimates. 2007-2022 1-Yr American Community Survey Data • Created with Datawrapper

The pandemic complicates this analysis a bit, however. While higher vacancy rates in 2021 are correlated with a significant drop in homelessness, it is worth noting that the decline may appear more precipitous than it was. Two CoC's did not perform full counts in 2021. Likewise, the government provided unprecedented levels of emergency rental assistance and pandemic unemployment assistance. This increased public support combined with local, state and federal eviction moratoria meant that many families who might have fallen into homelessness due to eviction or sudden job loss were able to stay in their homes because of these new (if temporary) outlays.

Conclusion

Greater Boston has persistently high rates of homelessness, especially relative to the rest of the country. While we aren't back to our 2014 peak, homelessness has been rising, with an especially large increase in 2023. Fortunately, a large share of those experiencing homelessness in Greater Boston are living in some sort of shelter. Among large U.S. cities, Boston has the second highest rate of homelessness rate but also the eighth lowest rate of unsheltered homelessness.

While substance use, mental health challenges, poverty, domestic violence, and a history of incarceration contribute to cases of homelessness, they do not explain the region's high homelessness rates compared to other metro areas. The main differentiator is Greater Boston's shortage of affordable market-rate housing, which limits options for families with modest means. The region's thriving economy has not been matched by sufficient housing development, leading to higher rates of homelessness than in places with more affordable housing options.

The near-term challenge of increased demand for temporary shelter from families and those seeking asylum is pressing. But addressing homelessness in Greater Boston in the long term will require structural solutions, specifically the construction of far more diverse, lower-cost housing. This approach will ensure that families at all income levels can access decent housing without risking bouts of homelessness.