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Policy Brief: Policymakers Can Solve Homelessness by Scaling Up Rental Assistance and Supportive Services

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Housing is a basic human need, but stable housing is out of reach or hard to keep for far too many people. This is a policy choice, not an economic inevitability. Evidence shows that we can solve homelessness[1] if we address its primary driver: the gap between incomes and rent. Rental assistance, which closes that gap, has been proven highly effective at both rehousing people experiencing homelessness and preventing future homelessness. Access to the supportive services people need to find and keep housing — such as help navigating the housing market, obtaining health care, and securing sufficient income to afford housing — is also critical.

Strategies that pair rental assistance with personalized health and social services (an approach often called Housing First) are highly effective in helping people become permanently housed. Providing rental assistance and supportive services to everyone who needs them is essential to ensuring everyone has a safe place to call home.

Policymakers can build toward a future in which no one has to choose between paying rent and buying food or meeting other basic needs, everyone can readily access supportive services, and anyone who loses their home is quickly rehoused. To achieve this, policymakers should:

- **Expand federal rental assistance,** building toward a rental assistance guarantee.[2] Policymakers should focus initially on reaching people with the lowest incomes, such as people at 15 or 30 percent of area median income and below, who are most at risk of experiencing homelessness.
- **Provide adequate, sustainable funding to make supportive services available to anyone who needs them to find and maintain housing.** These include housing navigation services (which help people search for housing that meets their needs), tenant support services (such as help understanding lease terms), community-based health care services, and other social services, such as affordable child care.

While this brief focuses on strategies to expand rental assistance and supportive services, other measures that increase incomes, enhance tenant protections, increase the supply of housing units, and improve sheltering and interim housing[3] options are also needed to ensure everyone has a home they can afford and can meet other basic needs.

Gap Between Incomes and Rents Drives Record Levels of Homelessness

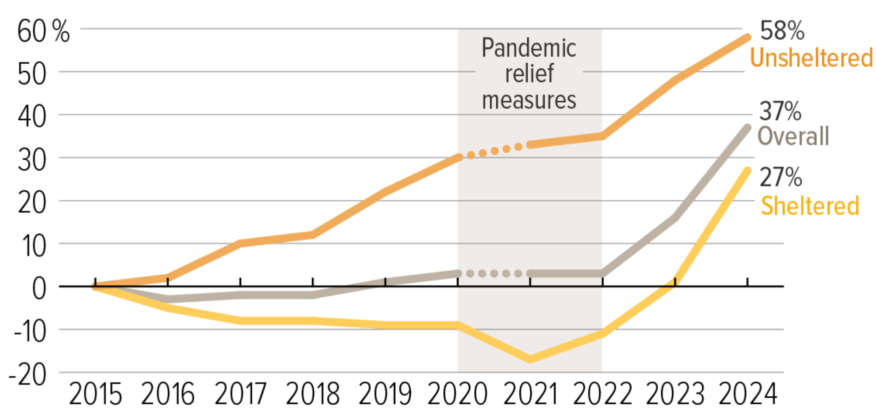
Housing affordability and homelessness have been serious problems for decades. While an inadequate supply of housing units contributes to the lack of affordable rental housing, most people with low incomes have a place to live but struggle to afford their current home, and most people who are unhoused could find stable housing if they received assistance to help pay the rent. Factors such as recessions, surges[4] in market rents, and natural disasters can cause unmet needs to grow even more severe.

About 8.5 million households[5] with very low incomes who received no housing assistance paid more than half their income on rent or lived in severely inadequate housing in 2021. Insufficient funding for rental assistance leaves these renters without help, forcing many to choose between paying rent or meeting other basic needs, like food, while others are forced to live in shelters, cars, or tents. As a result of the wide gap between renters' incomes and rent costs, homelessness has increased since 2017, rising steeply following the end of pandemic relief measures that curbed housing insecurity and homelessness. (See Figure 1.) Cost burden among renters and homelessness have now reached unprecedented levels.[6]

FIGURE 1

Homelessness Climbed to Another Record High After Expiration of Pandemic Relief, Eviction Protections

Percent change in people experiencing homelessness since 2015



Note: Dotted line indicates missing unsheltered homelessness data in 2021 due to pandemic-related data collection issues. Pandemic relief measures include the CDC eviction moratorium, Emergency Rental Assistance, Economic Impact Payments, and the expanded Child Tax Credit and Unemployment Insurance.

Source: HUD Point-in-Time count data from January of each year

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Rental Assistance Is Key to Solving Homelessness

Evidence shows that long-term rental assistance is a powerful tool for *rehousing* people experiencing homelessness. A rigorous evaluation of multiple strategies found that Housing Choice Vouchers were much more effective than time-limited assistance at helping unhoused families with children find and keep stable housing.[7] Vouchers and other forms of rental assistance (alongside supportive services such as housing navigation and health care) are essential components of supportive housing, an evidence-based strategy for rehousing people with disabilities.[8]

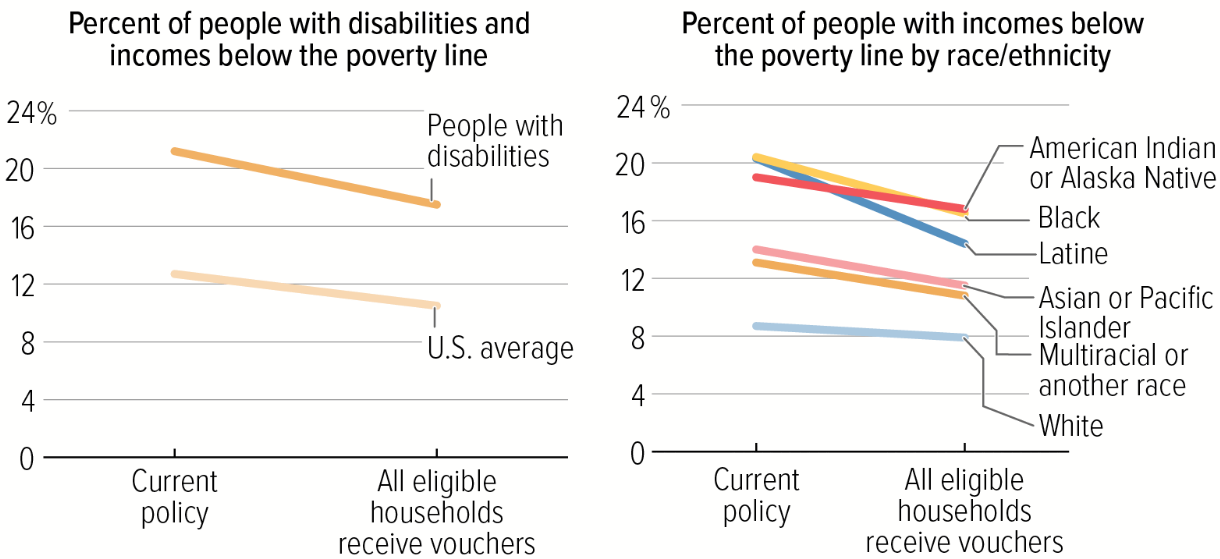
Research also shows that long-term rental assistance such as Housing Choice Vouchers is highly effective at *preventing* homelessness and the harm that comes with it. This is unsurprising — by helping families afford their rent obligations, rental assistance enables them to remain housed. Rental assistance also reduces overcrowding and unwanted moves and has cascading benefits that help people meet other basic needs.[9] Vouchers help over 5 million people in more than 2 million low-income households afford decent, stable housing, typically by helping them rent a modest unit of their choice in the private market for as long as they need assistance.

Policymakers built on these lessons when responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the Emergency Rental Assistance program delivered short-term assistance to millions of renters who struggled to keep up with rent. The unprecedented pandemic relief measures, which also included eviction moratoria and income supports, helped many people stay housed at a time when incomes were unstable and rents were increasing rapidly. Unfortunately, policymakers failed to replace short-term pandemic relief with the sustained increases in rental assistance needed to keep people stably housed over the longer term, leading to a steep rise in homelessness when the pandemic measures ended, as Figure 1 shows.

Moving forward, policymakers should build toward a rental assistance guarantee. Beyond addressing homelessness, overcrowding, and housing instability, expanding rental assistance would also help reduce poverty. One study found that universal rental assistance would lift over 7 million people above the poverty line and cut poverty rates by 29 percent for Latine people, by nearly one-fifth for Black, Asian, and Pacific Islander peoples, and by 11 percent for American Indians and Alaska Natives. (See Figure 2.) A rental assistance guarantee would also cut poverty by 25 percent among people with disabilities and even more among Black and Latine people with disabilities.

FIGURE 2

Expanding Housing Vouchers Would Cut Poverty and Reduce Disparities



Note: Currently about 1 in 4 households eligible for a voucher receives any type of federal rental assistance. Latine category may contain individuals of any race who identify as Latine or Hispanic; other categories exclude individuals who identify as Latine or Hispanic. People with disabilities = Adults and children with disabilities who receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) or Veterans Disability Compensation, have a work-limiting disability, or had any physical, mental, or emotional condition that makes it difficult or impossible to perform basic activities outside the home alone.

Source: Columbia University Center on Poverty and Social Policy calculations using data from the 2019 Annual Social and Economic Supplement to the Current Population Survey

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Individualized Supportive Services Are Essential

Regardless of their life circumstances, everyone should have the help they need to find and afford housing. A robust body of research shows that providing *voluntary* and *individualized* supportive services alongside affordable housing consistently does more to reduce homelessness and improve housing stability than older models that deny housing to anyone who doesn't accept one-size-fits-all services. But too often, individualized services are unavailable or inaccessible, particularly for people with low incomes and people who need intensive supportive services, because funding is disjointed and inadequate. Communities and providers cobble together funding from health insurance and a variety of federal, state, and local grants, but they often lack the staff and resources they need to meet the demand for services.[10] This makes it difficult to implement evidence-based housing solutions such as supportive housing.

Policymakers should set a goal of ensuring that everyone, including people with the lowest incomes, can readily access services that support housing stability. For example, they should leverage state Medicaid programs and fully fund public housing agencies and homelessness Continuums of Care that coordinate local or regional homelessness services. Critical supportive services include:

- **Housing navigation services to help people find housing that meets their needs.** Renters with low incomes must typically search for homes without the help of a professional.

- **Tenancy support services to help people avoid eviction and stay housed.** Tenancy supports can help people understand and fulfill their responsibilities as tenants and resolve conflicts with neighbors or landlords.[11]
- **Comprehensive community-based health care services, including physical, mental, substance use, and long-term care**. Hospitalization or institutionalization, even for short periods, can destabilize housing. Timely access to health care and support to manage physical, mental health, or substance use conditions is key to preventing such disruptions.[12]
- **Other social services, such as legal aid, child care, help applying for public benefits, and support securing well-paying jobs**. These services can promote economic security and housing stability.

One example of the success of pairing individualized supportive services with rental assistance is the Housing and Urban Development-Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program, which has been instrumental in cutting veteran homelessness in half.[13] In large part due to this program, 85 communities — including rural, suburban, and urban areas — and three states had functionally ended veteran homelessness as of October 2024.[14] Such resources should be available at scale to *everyone* who needs them.

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[1] You can find additional explanations and recommendations in the full-length version of this brief. Anna Bailey, Peggy Bailey, and Erik Gartland, "Policymakers Can Solve Homelessness by Scaling Up Proven Solutions: Rental Assistance and Supportive Services," CBPP, updated February 27, 2025, https://www.cbpp.org/research/housing/policymakers-can-solve-homelessness-by-scaling-up-proven-solutions-rental.

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