

# Unsheltered Des Moines Study Summary

Perceptions of Service Delivery and Resources  
Amongst Des Moines-Area Persons Experiencing  
Unsheltered Homelessness

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Elizabeth Talbert, Ph.D., Department of Culture and Society

Matthew Record, Ph.D., Department of Political Science

Drake University



# Unsheltered Study Basics

The Des Moines Unsheltered Study was commissioned to better understand the experiences of people living unsheltered (on the streets or in places not intended for human habitation) in Polk County. The study examines why individuals face barriers to shelter and permanent housing in Greater Des Moines and provides a platform for people experiencing unsheltered homelessness to tell the community how best to help them. Drawing from first-hand accounts and extensive research, the study presents recommendations to improve homeless services, create system-wide, change, and ultimately reduce the number of our neighbors living outdoors.

- Polk County's Homeless Coordinating Council Extreme Weather Workgroup initiated the study in collaboration with Homeward, community partners, and **a research team at Drake University led by Dr. Elizabeth Talbert.**
- Funding for the project came from Drake University (The Slay Fund for Social Justice and Fitzsimonds Faculty Fellowships), Wells Fargo, the City of Des Moines, Polk County, and Nationwide.
- In total, the study team conducted **152 surveys of persons experiencing homelessness living unsheltered in Polk County, and 37 in-depth interviews** of the same population.
- Planning for the project began in February 2022 with data collection of the survey results interviews occurring June through October 2022.

# Background Literature

The Des Moines Unsheltered Study research team conducted a review of relevant information about unsheltered homelessness, previous studies, and evidence-based best practices. Some of their findings include the following:

- All **health outcomes are materially worse for unhoused individuals** than for the housed population
- The most basic threat to an unsheltered person living outside is **exposure to the elements** and weather.
- **NIMBY** (Not in My Backyard) ordinances are common throughout the nation. These laws are specifically aimed at making unsheltered homelessness less visible, but can often further marginalize individuals experiencing homelessness and complicate their relationship with law enforcement.
- People experiencing homelessness are disproportionately likely to experience **physical or emotional victimization**. This risk is magnified for women and transgender individuals who face additional barriers to safety.
- Unsheltered individuals want to maintain basic **autonomy** when entering a shelter or receiving services. If individuals feel they are forced to forego aspects of private life that sheltered individuals take for granted, it can create barriers to entering shelter.

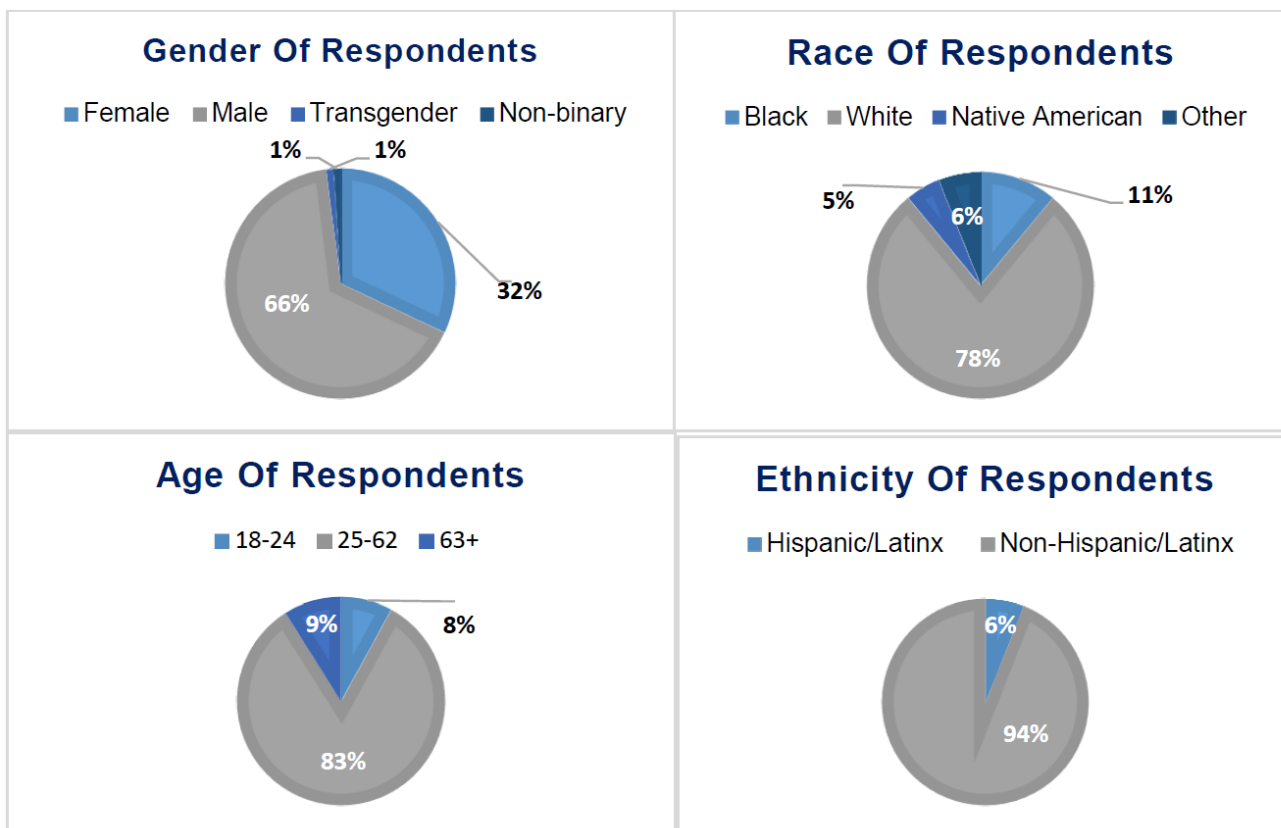
”

I just want  
[people] to  
have a little bit  
more  
compassion  
with the  
homeless  
community  
because a lot  
of us just don't  
have choices  
that people  
take for  
granted.”

-Study  
Participant

# Survey Findings

152 total individuals were surveyed as part of this research effort. Not all questions were answered by all participants.



**57%** of our respondents reported being consistently outside, except for a day here or there in emergency shelter; 42% of respondents reported living unsheltered off-and-on.

The survey also demonstrated that almost all respondents **wanted a permanent home, such as an apartment or a house**. Respondents suggested they wanted “anything” that was safe, affordable, and allowed them to be among important people in their lives: family, friends, and pets. **Only two survey respondents out of 143 people said they wanted to continue to live outside.**

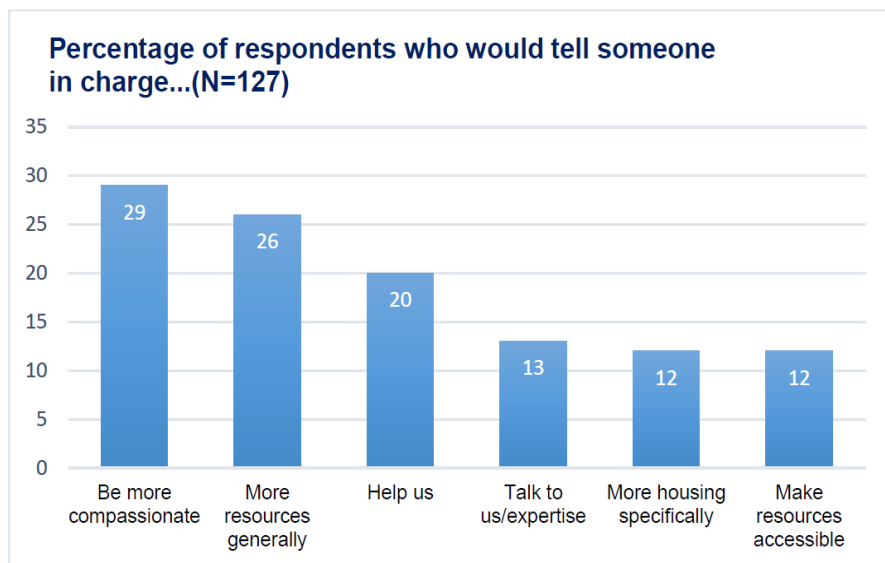


# Additional Survey Findings

Unsurprisingly, the **overwhelming majority of respondents (63%) described the cold as the biggest challenge to living outside in winter**. One put it in stark terms: “The cold at night can kill you.” Another 13% of respondents said the weather generally was an issue, and 10% mentioned frostbite specifically.

Responses about the challenges of living outdoors during the summer focused on physical stress. **Fifty-three percent of respondents mentioned the heat and overheating** as one of the biggest challenges, while 20% mentioned that access to appropriate hydration was a major challenge.

## If you could tell someone in charge how to help people who are living outside, what would you say?



**24% of respondents said they liked absolutely nothing about the experience of living unsheltered.**

“This is one of the hardest things I’ve ever gone through,” one respondent said.



## What would help in the summer?

- Increased Water Access
- Cooling Stations
- Cleaning Resources
- Access to Shelter
- Portable Cooling Options

## What would help in the winter?

- Heating Methods
- Access to Shelter
- Access to resources
- Clothing and blankets
- More shelters

People said they needed more accessible resources generally, such as food, water, regular access to showers and toilets, as well as more affordable and accessible housing specifically.

# Barriers to Shelter in Polk County

In conducting the surveys and in-depth interviews with Polk County residents experiencing unsheltered homelessness, the research team identified **common themes from individuals about barriers to emergency shelter and housing**. The following are some of the most common reasons people would not seek shelter while experiencing unsheltered homelessness in our community:



## PHYSICAL CONDITIONS OF THE SHELTER

People expressed concerns about crowding, the large number of bunks, and sanitation concerns in the congregate environment.



## RULES, ROUTINES, AND NORMS OF THE SHELTER

Rules that limited movement or access to personal devices (ex. phones) were problems for individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness. There is also often confusion about rules, norms, and expectations of different spaces and programs. Many individuals did stay in emergency shelter but “timing out” rules ensured that they could not be there consistently.



## PERCEPTIONS OF SHELTER STAFF

While many clients had positive experience with shelter staff, some expressed that they perceived staff as not caring or inconsistent in the enforcement of rules.



## PROBLEMS WITH OTHER SHELTER CLIENTS

Respondents explained how their own mental health issues made it difficult for them to be around other people, or how others’ mental health issues made them feel uncomfortable in congregate settings. A lack of privacy and the volume of people experiencing trauma in the same space makes shelter an unsafe environment for some residents.



## GENDER SPECIFIC EXPERIENCES AND BARRIERS

The binary gender division in many area shelters proves difficult for trans individuals or those that would like to remain with a partner of the opposite gender identify. Unwanted attention from others and fears of violence are common in congregate settings, specifically for women and trans individuals.



## APATHY AND THE PRECARIOUS BALANCE OF DAILY SURVIVAL

Individuals expressed how past and current trauma contributed to the experience of depression and the effort of day-to-day survival made it difficult to think about the future. Many people experienced frustration with the lack of available services and supports to exit homelessness.

# Policy Implications

The Des Moines Unsheltered Study team **tied specific barriers Polk County people experiencing homelessness conveyed in their interviews to policy recommendations** that may be beneficial in the short and medium term to reduce unsheltered homelessness. The team also compiled some longer-term structural recommendations for the Polk County homeless response system that that **reflect research literature best practices:**

## SHORT-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- [Address and Change Several Comfort and Accessibility Issues at Emergency Shelter](#)- Assess how emergency shelter practices and policies influence individuals' ability and desire to enter shelter during extreme weather and implement any low-cost, low-barrier changes that may increase shelter uptake. Consider the configuration of overflow rooms, systems for handling personal items and pets, and communicate any changes through outreach to unsheltered individuals.
- [Survival Action Plans and Follow-up with People Living Outside](#)- Coordinate among Polk County's homelessness service providers to create an outreach and action plan for each unsheltered individual in the community.

## MEDIUM-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- [Warming Stations as Alternate Overflow Emergency Shelter](#)- Implement a space that is less-crowded and less-scheduled than traditional shelter to provide respite from the cold. Consider constructing warming stations that, with the addition of cots and more staff, could also serve as alternate temporary emergency shelter for unsheltered individuals
- [Begin Transitioning to a Norm of Low-Barrier, Non-Congregate Emergency Shelter](#)- Create more private, non-congregate emergency shelter settings (via individual rooms in a larger space or hotel/motel settings). This recommendation is one of the most needed and hoped for reforms amongst the people living unsheltered in Polk County who participated in this study.
- [Improve the Physical Conditions of Shelter](#)- Mitigate overcrowding and sanitation concerns in shelter environment and communicate with clients about these adjustments.
- [Create Resources and Spaces that Address Gender and Family-Specific Issues and Increase Capacity for Families in Local Shelters](#)- Explore creating a women's-specific shelter, identify how best to safely accommodate trans individuals in shelter, work to keep families together during housing crises, and find system-wide solutions for clients with animals.

# Additional Policy Implications

## MEDIUM-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- [Reassess Rules, Norms and Routines](#)- Evaluate rules within the shelter environment to ensure consistent policies and identify potential reforms to maintain a respectful environment without excessively dictating client behavior
- [Disrupt Conflicts Between Clients and Limit On-Site Drug Usage](#)- Work to address fears and struggles that emerge from individuals being around so many other people. Create specific areas of shelter for private or non-triggering spaces. Examine substance use policies and harm reduction policies within the shelter space.
- [Strengthen Relationships Between Organization, Staff, and Clients](#)- Ensure consistent staff training and shared values across the homeless response system. Strengthen staff pay, support, and resources. Host regular listening sessions for both clients and staff.

## LONG-TERM POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- [Strengthen and Leverage Regular Data Collection Practices](#)- Institutionalize regular opportunities for analysis of homeless system aggregate data. Reflect on service delivery effectiveness and patterns in system-wide data.
- [Invest in Affordable Permanent Housing and Permanent Supportive Housing](#)- Focus on providing sufficient permanent housing in our community for residents experiencing unsheltered homelessness. Specifically build upon permanent supportive housing resources with more in-depth services and supports.
- [Solicit Frequent Input from Unsheltered Individuals and Frontline Providers](#)- Continue to provide opportunities for people with lived experience in homelessness to provide leadership and direction. Use the expertise of front-line staff when making high-level decisions about Polk County.



“Everybody thinks we’re homeless because we chose that. Sometimes that’s not, not the issue. ... It just so happened that our money just wasn’t there because of our job being so stupid, and now we’re back on the streets. That’s, we didn’t choose that. ... **We don’t choose to have two jobs and still have no money.**”

- Study Participant