

# SNAPSHOT 2020

OF SERVICE AND SHELTER USE  
USING 2019 CALENDAR YEAR DATA

IOWANS  
EXPERIENCING  
HOMELESSNESS



# #HOMELESSIOWANS

# 11,777

Homeless lowans were served by agencies in 2019 at emergency shelter (10,624), safe haven (64), transitional housing (1,727).

Agencies permanently housed lowans in rapid rehousing (3,123), permanent supportive housing (1,008), and supportive housing without a disability requirement (327).

Each number in this report is an un-duplicated count.

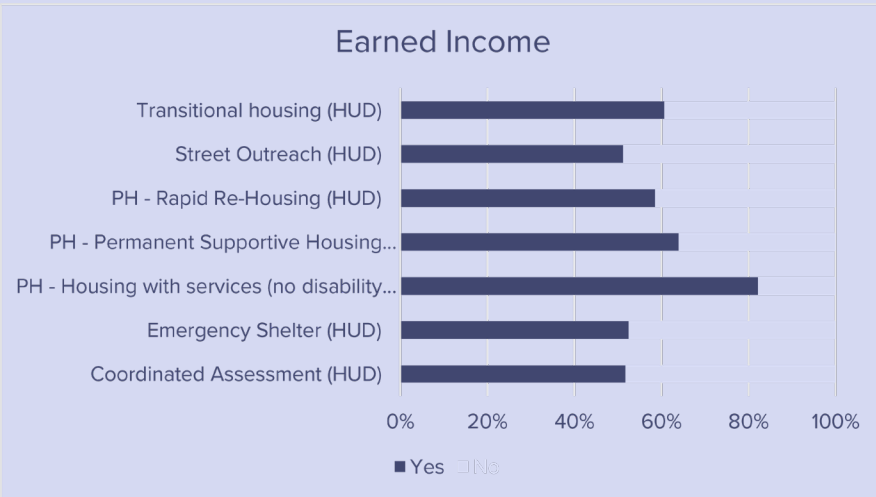
A person may be counted in multiple populations if they were in multiple populations during the year.

Institute for Community Alliances (ICA) operates many HMIS systems in American states, counties, and municipalities. We organize our work according to continua of care, a HUD defined region for service delivery and funding. In Iowa, Polk County is a COC, Woodbury county is a COC, Pottawattamie county Iowa is part of the Omaha Nebraska COC, but in this report the Pottawattamie county providers are included in some tables, and across the state the remaining 96 counties comprise the Balance of State continuum of care.

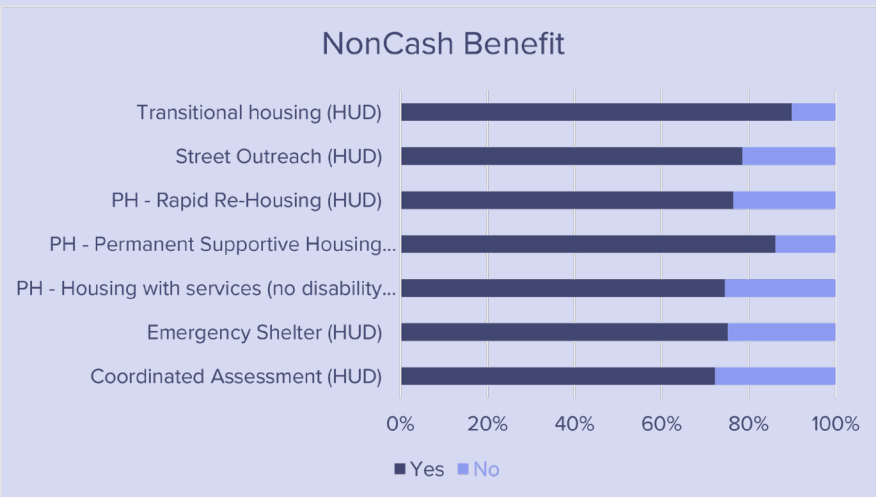
This report provides a snapshot of homelessness in Iowa, but it is necessarily from a perspective. In the last 30 or more years of working with homeless populations, 11 of those years as the lead data analyst at ICA, I have gained an understanding that the difference between people experiencing housing instability including those who are literally homeless for part or all of the year, as opposed to those who are simply experiencing poverty, is not clearly definable aside from the lack of a permanent place to sleep. There is not a causal relationship between any variable we have and homelessness, as compared to poverty broadly. Further, we cannot look at any variable within the homeless population and predict who will become chronically homeless.

There is a relationship between homelessness and disabilities including substance abuse and mental health disabilities. However, it is not the simple causal relationship people often assume. Disabilities do not simply cause homelessness, though if a person is disabled, they are more likely to be homeless, and often need more resources to find stability. Disability diagnosis among people experiencing homeless for the first time is much lower than it is among long term and chronically homeless clients, but disability is not predictive of who will become chronically homeless. This is partially because more accurate diagnosis become available as clients get access to mental health resources, and to some extent it is a result of disabilities caused by homeless. There is a relationship, but cause is not definite.

Plenty of people have challenging disabilities and do not become homeless. We know disabilities make stability harder, but beyond that having stable robust networks of support are what causes stability. The service providing agencies of the continua try to provide aspects of support commonly found in those networks.



Although predicting who will become homeless is not possible, and even correlating groups with probability their members will experience homelessness is difficult, there are some things we know will ease and speed the path to stability. Popular imagination suggests a homeless person who is unemployed, but we are seeing that a lot of people become homeless with earned income, or with social security income or social security for disabled income, and those households who have income often have what would have been sufficient income, but that the cost of housing has steadily increased while those incomes have remained constant. We see statewide that 55% of households have some sort of income, as many as 64% of households in permanent supportive housing, where services are available to assist with stability.



Additionally, many households have access to resources like supplemental nutrition assistance, additional food pantry access from other sources, workforce development and counseling. Across the community we see that providers come together and work in concert to help community members in need, and most people who experience housing instability want to be stable. They are not homeless because of some intrinsic failing in their person, but because of an intrinsic failing in our culture. We commodify housing, a wise investor holds diversity in their portfolio, and so the market in turn responds and forces scarcity. We typically see about 10 empty and unoccupied properties for every family that needs housing, and while many of those properties are in transition between owners, enough to house every homeless family several times over are simply surplus investment stock. Upward market pressure means at the bottom of the income scales there will intrinsically be some people who cannot afford housing. So long as housing is a commodity, we will have homelessness. It seems doubly cruel to also tell homeless families it is because of some failing of their character.

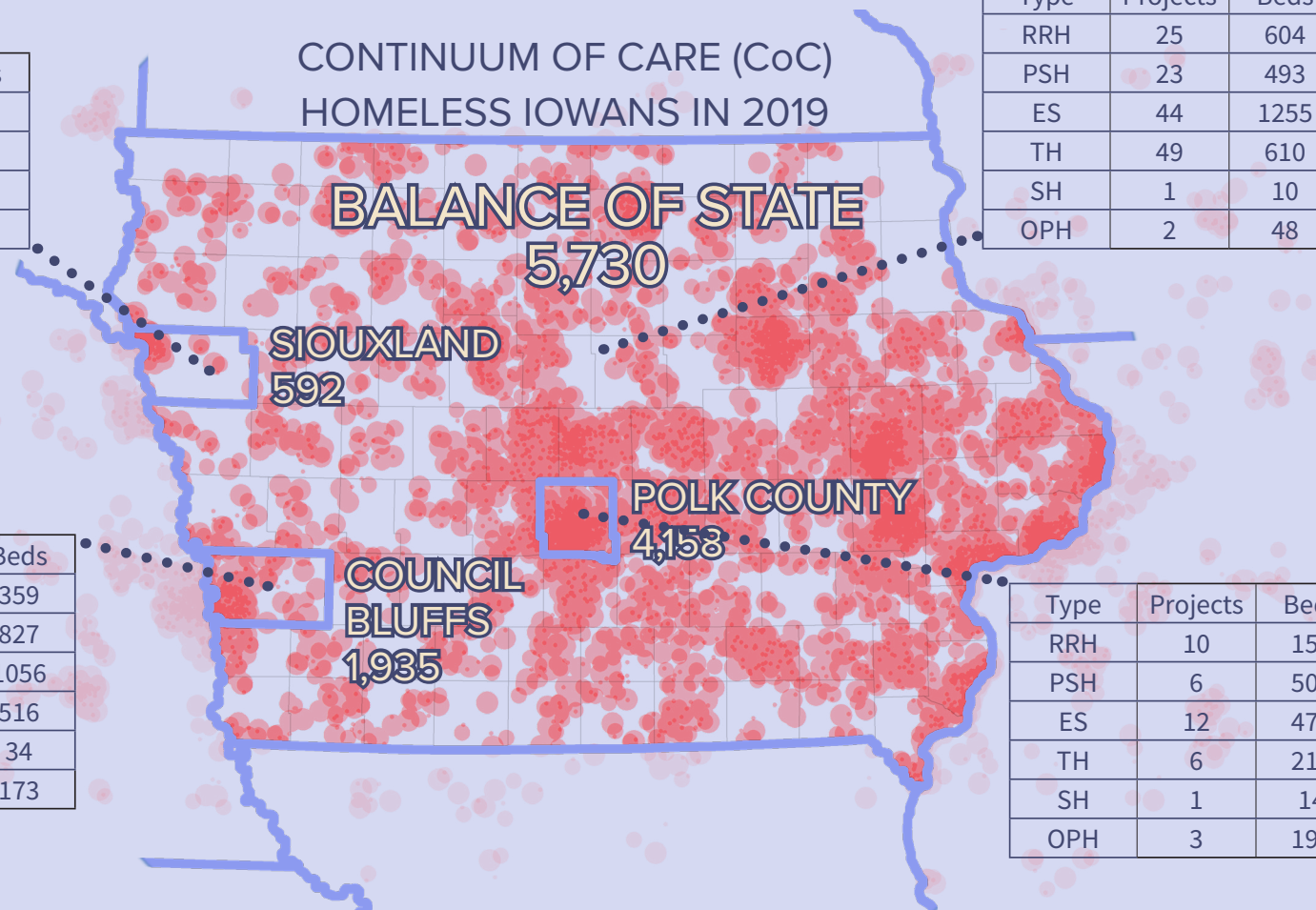
How many people experienced homelessness in Iowa in 2019?  
And who served them?

Type	Projects	Beds
RRH	2	50
PSH	3	51
ES	6	275
TH	4	119

Type	Projects	Beds
RRH	25	604
PSH	23	493
ES	44	1255
TH	49	610
SH	1	10
OPH	2	48

Type	Projects	Beds
RRH	13	359
PSH	18	827
ES	12	1056
TH	13	516
SH	1	34
OPH	3	173

Type	Projects	Beds
RRH	10	150
PSH	6	506
ES	12	474
TH	6	216
SH	1	14
OPH	3	191



# HOMELESS DEMOGRAPHICS

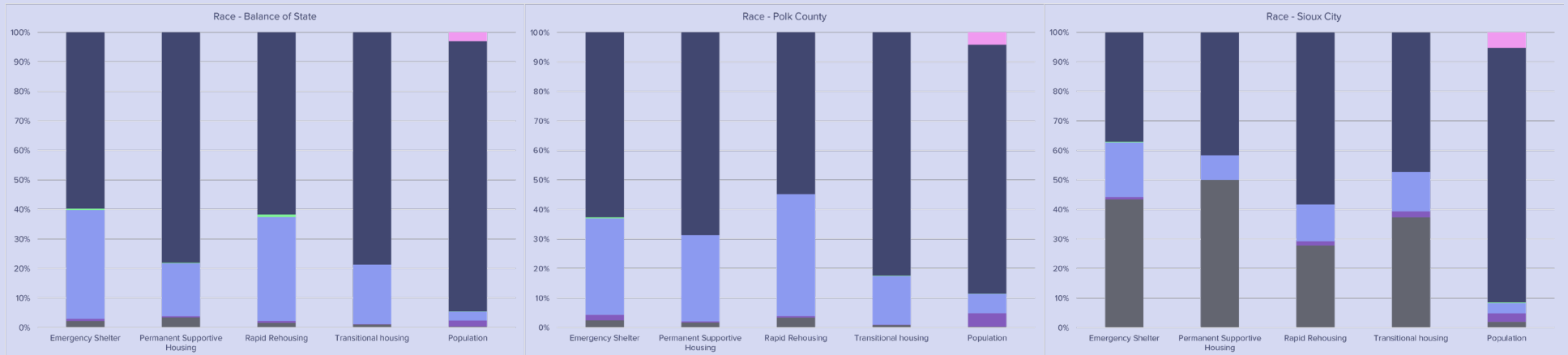
Many social problems accompany poverty, as they accompany any high stress condition that seems relentless and inescapable. Of course, when high stress relentless and inescapable conditions happen to people with sufficient resources, like what we saw during COVID-19, it was easier to take a perspective of sympathy. The news reported with concern and there was a widespread effort from government agencies to render aid. Most years, though, for populations experiencing housing instability and poverty we see elevated incidences of domestic violence, substance abuse, mental health disability symptoms.

This is exacerbated by the systemic societal discrimination we see, and have seen brought to light, faced by members of racial and ethnic minority communities, and people with gender and sexuality identities that do not conform to societal norms.

We see that minorities, though overrepresented in the shelters, have significantly less access to permanent and transitional programs. The continua are working to address this.

Iowa as a whole, a largely rural space, has a very small portion of the population comprised of minority groups, and even the urban spaces like Des Moines and Iowa City are predominately white. The shelters are disproportionately populated by minorities. Similar to how the broad housing market is structured to exclude a certain portion of the economy, this phenomenon is in part realized by de facto segregation. Lasting effects of historical practices like red-lining and federal loan discrimination are still visible. Though these things are illegal today, their legacy is still visible in patterns of home ownership and the use of credit scores in denying access to housing.

- Other
- White
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- African American
- Asian
- Native American



# EDUCATION AT ENTRY

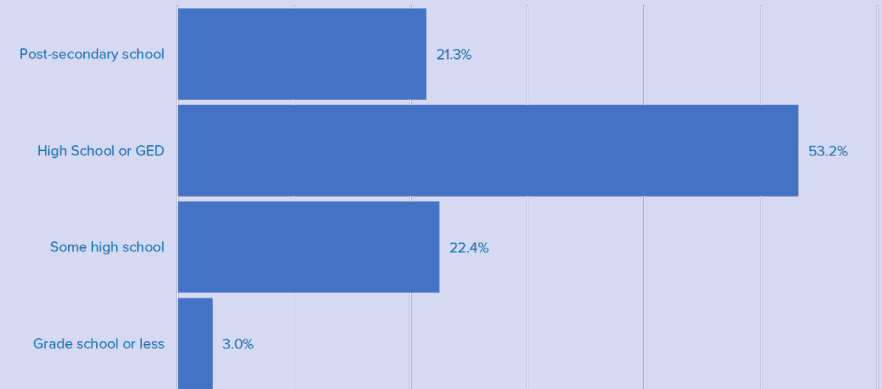
A solution that is often heard being offered to the problem of homelessness is education. Either, programs to continue education so people can complete degrees or programs to train people for new career fields are both good solutions. There is a

strong established relationship between income and level of education. But, as we established, unemployment is not universal among homeless populations and education as a path to greater income is most effective as a long-term plan. Also, as many people would be surprised to discover that unemployment is not universal among homeless populations, so too levels of education are higher than many suppose.

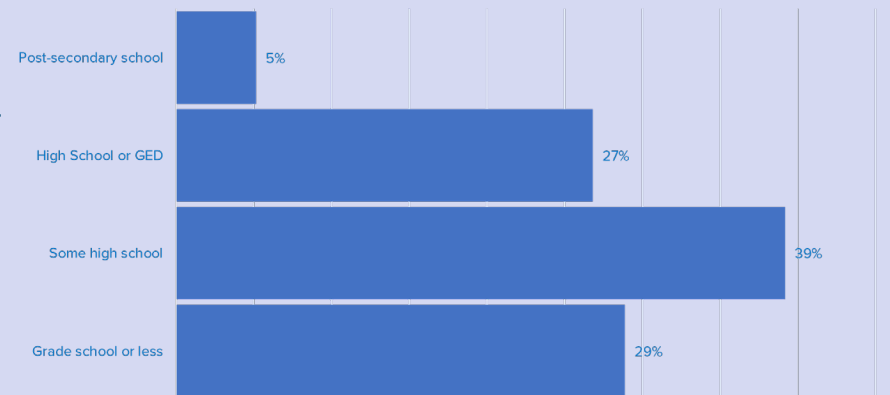
A more reasonable solution would be to stop looking for justifications why these people in particular can be blamed for their predicament, what personal fault can we hang the blame on? But, instead, to acknowledge that structural issues create homelessness.

The exception is runaway and homeless youth, who have not been given the opportunity to complete their education. Though their homelessness can also be framed in terms of broader structural failings, the easy sympathy for children experiencing homelessness makes it easier to see that we, as a culture, need to lend our support. In those cases, level of education is tracked more closely and it is important to make sure the youth are given every chance to complete their education and move on to higher education if they are so inclined.

Level of Education (non-RHY)



Level of Education (RHY)

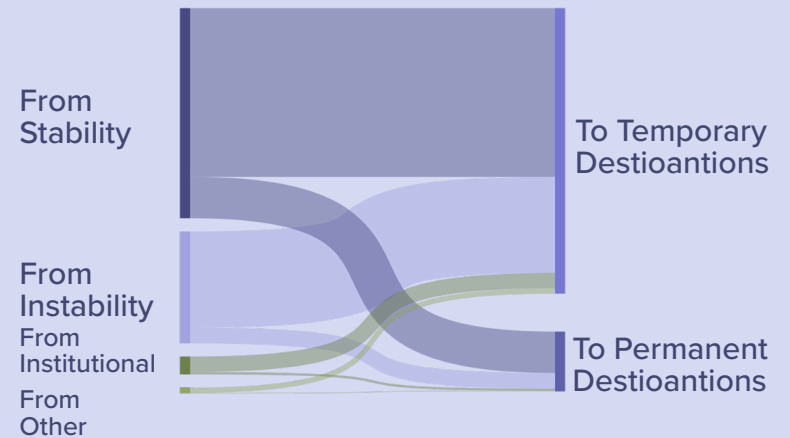


One of the best measures of the efficacy of our intervention in the incidence of homelessness is looking at where people were before they became homeless and where they were after they left service. HUD has aggregated the destinations people can exit to by their permanence. The most useful distinctions for where people were before service are, on the continuum from most problematic top least, a place not meant for human habitation such as a car or a camp, then an institutional setting like a prison or a hospital, then another person's home often called doubling up, then a place that was the home of the person seeking assistance.

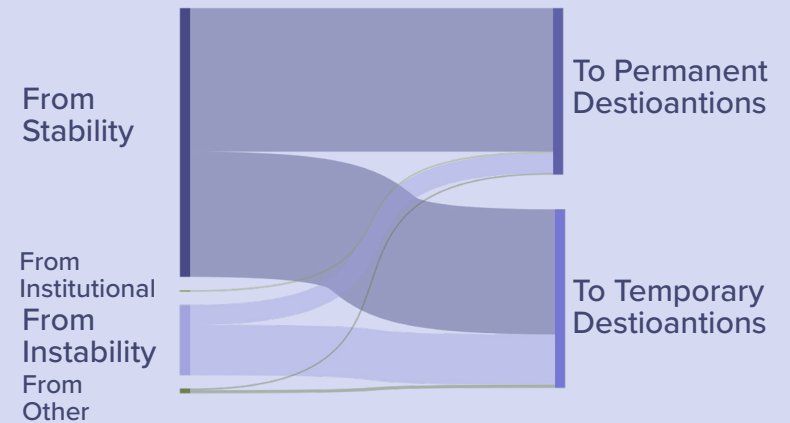
A related measure of success is the returns to homelessness. Using that same two-year lookback, if the person seeking assistance is returning from what had been at the time thought to be a permanent destination, then this incidence is considered a return. We avoid the word recidivistic because of the connotations of criminality and a constant mindfulness that the act of being homeless is not itself criminal, and that the people seeking assistance are themselves the victims of systemic economic impropriety. But a similar idea is what we are trying to measure at the system level? How good is the system as a whole, the people operating the continuum such that they constitute the system, at knowing whether a person believed to have been placed in a permanent destination is in fact stable on a permanent basis? Or is their stability in fact temporary as measured by returns to homelessness?

We can combine this measure with a consideration of whether this was the person's first experience of housing instability. If a person has had instability recently, within the last two years such that they sought assistance, then this incidence is not considered to be the first time. If it has been more than two years since they sought assistance, then this is defined as fist time of homelessness. Similar, and related, is the measure of chronicity. If a person is returning, have they had sufficient experiences of instability for the frequency to reach a chronic state. If so, and if they have an accompanying disability interfering with their ability to find stability, then we can say they or their family if they are the head of household are chronically homeless.

### Emergency Shelter Programs



### Permanent Housing Programs



### Permanent Housing Programs





# SYSTEM PERFORMANCE

	Exited Permanent Housing to a Permanent Destination in the previous 2 years, and returned to homelessness	Exited Shelter to a Permanent Destination in the previous 2 years, and returned to homelessness
Polk County	24%	31%
Balance of State	13%	22%
Siouxland	17%	7%
Council Bluffs	27%	31%

	Average Days in Shelter	Median Days in Shelter
Polk County	48	26
Balance of State	40	25
Siouxland	52	56
Council Bluffs	67	32

	Percent of First Time Homeless
Polk County	67%
Balance of State	79%
Siouxland	95%
Council Bluffs	64%

The measures of length of episode, permanent exits, returns from permanent exits to homelessness, and first-time homelessness form a set of vectors that can, in theory, lead to ending homelessness. There has historically been a debate about the value of claiming ending homelessness as a goal, understanding as I mentioned before, that due to societal structures we can never hope to end homelessness without reforming our economic system. But we still speak of ending homelessness, and when we use that term, we mean making homelessness rare, brief and one time.

When we consider the number of days a person spends in shelter, we look at the average and the median. Median, as a statistic, is less impacted by outliers and so you get a much better sense of how many days most people spend in shelter. But if the average is far away from the median it is likely a result of a few long-term stayers pulling it up. Even at 25-26 days, which we see in the two largest continua, that is 3-4 weeks of a person's or family's life spent in a state of severe instability. That kind of instability, we know, can have long term dramatic impacts on a person's health and welfare.

But, if we can get the length of stay down to a short period, the percent of first time as high as possible, the percent going to permanent exits close to 100%, and the returns to homelessness following a permanent exit close to zero, then we can declare that homelessness is ended for our society. Unfortunately, that goal is still a long way off.

For more, including county details, visit [www.icalliances.org/annual-report-2020](http://www.icalliances.org/annual-report-2020)

**EVERYONE  
DESERVES A  
HOME**

