

Increasing Latino Homelessness— What’s Happening, Why, and What to Do About It

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Introduction

After more than two years of health, economic, and social impacts from COVID-19 that amplified existing inequalities, an alarming trend surfaced in the 2022 Point-in-Time (PIT) Count numbers: a steep rise in homelessness among Latinos in the United States. The pandemic may have greatly impacted housing stability among this population, with more Latinos entering homeless services and experiencing unsheltered homelessness than ever before. It must be noted that Latinos are far from a homogenous group and represent a diverse array of cultures, languages, and races, with varying acculturation and immigration statuses. That said, this brief analyzes data from the 2022 PIT Count, examines the factors leading to an increase in Latino homelessness, and looks towards policy solutions at the federal and local levels. It also notes program changes that local Continuums of Care (CoCs) and service providers can consider to better serve this unique population.

¹ Note that the views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or the United States government.

Data

Why Existing Data on Latino Homelessness May Not Tell the Full Story

In recent years, data from the annual PIT Count has shown that Latinos are proportionally represented in the population of people experiencing homelessness and, in some regions, even slightly underrepresented. In 2021, Latinos comprised 18.8 percent of the overall population in the 2021 American Community Survey and were slightly overrepresented in the 2022 PIT Count nationally, where they comprised 24.1 percent of roughly 582,000 people who were reported as experiencing homelessness. In heavily Latino communities like Los Angeles County, Latinos represent 49 percent of the overall population, but were just 36 percent of the population experiencing homelessness in 2020 and 44 percent of the population experiencing homelessness in 2022.

This data comes in sharp contrast to other communities of color, especially Black and African American people as well as American Indian/Alaska Native/Indigenous people, who are disproportionately represented among people experiencing homelessness. For example, Black and African American people comprised 14.2 percent of the overall population in 2021 Census, but 39.4 percent of the population experiencing homelessness.

Given the rates of poverty and housing insecurity among many Latino communities around the country, one would expect the rates of homelessness amongst Latino households to be significantly higher. This phenomenon has been termed the “Latino Paradox,” and researchers have speculated that Latinos’ reliance on social networks and informal support systems have allowed many of these households to avoid homelessness.

However, there are a complex set of reasons why prior homeless count data may have masked a larger population of Latinos experiencing homelessness or at risk of falling into homelessness. As discussed in greater detail below, Latinos are less likely than other groups to utilize the shelter systemⁱ as well as other mainstream servicesⁱⁱ that may lead to connections to the homeless service system’s resources. When experiencing unsheltered homelessness, this population is also more likely to seek places like abandoned buildings or vehicles, which are more challenging to count under a PIT Count methodology. Finally, Latinos’ higher likelihood of reliance on social networks leads to couch surfing, doubling or tripling up, and relying on substandard or overcrowded housing.ⁱⁱⁱ While this may not show up in PIT Count data, it suggests a large population at imminent risk of unsheltered homelessness and facing high vulnerability in the event of a shock in the economy or housing market.

Latino Homelessness on the Rise

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)’s newly-released 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report to Congress shows that, at the national level, Latino homelessness is rising faster than for other groups and that on balance, overall homelessness for non-Latino groups declined (see Table 1). The latest PIT Count data shows that people identifying as Hispanic or Latino make up 24 percent of the total people experiencing homelessness, but only around 19 percent of the total U.S. population.

Moreover, homelessness among people identifying as Hispanic or Latino increased by eight percent between 2020 and 2022, with a 16 percent increase in those who were unsheltered.^{iv} These increases outpace overall increases in homelessness across the nation, as well as outcomes for people identifying as Black and those identifying as American Indian, Alaska Native, or Indigenous.

Table 1. National Homelessness Increases by Race/Ethnicity, 2020–2022

Population	2020 PIT Count Number	2022 PIT Count Number	Percentage Change
Overall	580,455	582,462	+0.3%
Ethnicity			
Hispanic/Latino	130,348	140,230	+7.6%
Non-Hispanic/Latino	450,107	442,220	-1.8%
Race			
Black/African American	228,796	217,366	-5.0%
White	280,612	291,395	+3.8%
Asian	7,638	8,261	+8.2%
American Indian or Alaska Native	18,935	19,618	+3.6%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	8,794	10,461	+19.0%
Multiple Races	35,680	35,383	-0.8%

Across the largest CoCs nationwide by PIT Count, Latino homelessness increased more (or decreased less) than the overall homeless population change in every case. Even in jurisdictions where there were sharp declines in overall homelessness, such as in the Texas Balance of State CoC and the Santa Ana, Anaheim/Orange County CoC, the decline in Latino homelessness was more muted than declines in other populations. In San Francisco, there was a moderate decline in overall homelessness, but a sharp increase in Latino homelessness. See Table 2 below for changes in homeless counts from 2020 to 2022. Note that in every CoC listed, Latino homelessness increased at a greater rate than overall homelessness. In those CoCs where homelessness declined, Latino homelessness either declined by less than the overall population or increased slightly.

Table 2. Top 10 CoCs Nationwide by 2020 PIT Count

CoC	Overall 2020 PIT Count	Overall 2022 PIT Count	Overall Homeless Population Change 2020–2022	Change in Latinos Experiencing Homelessness	Percentage Point Gap Between Latino Pop Change and Overall Pop Change
New York City CoC	77,943	61,840	-21%	-18%	+3%
Los Angeles City and County CoC	63,706	69,144	+9%	+26%	+17%
Seattle/King County CoC	11,751	13,368	+14%	+30%	+16%
San Jose, Santa Clara City & County CoC	9,605	10,028	+4%	+16%	+12%
Texas Balance of State CoC	9,198	7,054	-30%	-18%	+12%
Oakland, Berkeley, Alameda City and County CoC	8,137	9,747	+20%	+64%	+44%
San Francisco CoC	8,124	7,754	-5%	+34%	+39%
San Diego City and County CoC	7,638	8,427	+10%	+29%	+19%
Phoenix, Mesa/Maricopa County CoC	7,419	9,026	+22%	+42%	+20%
Santa Ana, Anaheim/Orange County CoC	6,978	5,718	-18%	-12%	+6%

Why Did Latino Homelessness Increase?

The data above leads to the critical question—why did Latino homelessness increase rapidly while other populations saw homelessness plateau, or in some cases even decline? Current PIT Count data is insufficient to fully answer this question. But dynamics that were established prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic itself, offer key clues for policymakers and service providers alike.

Factors That Predate COVID-19

Many of the drivers of homelessness are consistent across all populations, although they have an inordinate impact on the Latino community, which generally experiences poverty at a higher rate than their non-Latino White counterparts. In 2019, the poverty rate for Latinos was more than double the poverty rate for non-Latino White households (15.7 percent of Latino households, compared to 7.3 percent of White households). As a result, Latinos are:

- **Slightly more likely** than other populations to struggle from the lack of affordable housing. Nationally, 22 percent of White U.S. households were severely rent-burdened (paying 50 percent or more of their income on rent) while 27 percent of Latino households were severely rent-burdened.^v In California, some measures show Latino renters as far more vulnerable. A 2022 Census Bureau survey of renter hardship in California, which takes into account renters being late on their rent or having low confidence in their ability to pay their next rent on time, showed 44 percent of Latino renters reported renter hardship, compared to 33 percent of over-all renters and 21 percent of white renters.^{vi}
- **More likely** than other populations to have low incomes. Recent reports^{vii} indicate that a sizable proportion of the population experiencing homelessness has been in the workforce in the months leading up to their homelessness. Latinos, in general, have lower incomes than the general population; moreover, that income is often more unstable, as Latinos are more likely to be victims of wage theft^{viii} or engaged in seasonal employment in which income is inconsistent.^{ix}
- **More likely** than other populations to be impacted by weak tenants' rights nationwide. Eviction data is incomplete, and informal evictions (those that are not tracked) tend to far outpace formal evictions.^x But the data that does exist shows Latinos are disproportionately impacted by evictions.^{xi}

Furthermore, a number of additional factors have particular impacts on Latinos, which contribute to a greater housing instability among this population.

Factors Related to Immigration Status and Lack of Accessible, Reliable Information

A significant portion of the Latino population comprises recent immigrants with a range of immigration status challenges. While 17 percent of the overall U.S. population was foreign-born in 2019, 44.8 percent of the Latino population was foreign-born in 2019.^{xii}

While immigration contributes to a range of challenges for people that are undocumented, it also contributes to challenges for people with legal permanent residency and other immigration statuses. These issues include:

- Higher portions of this community who experience challenges with community integration, including understanding what rights are available to them within their host country (including tenants' rights) or how to navigate local systems, such as social services.
- Policy restrictions on a range of public benefits may not be available to someone depending on their immigration status. These benefits include federal housing programs that have an array of restrictions based on immigration status, as well as local programs such as General Relief cash assistance programs.
- A fear of accessing services due to potential impacts on immigration status. There are several impacts that can arise from accessing public services, such as being labeled a "public charge," which can impact an immigrant's ability to achieve legal permanent residency or citizenship status. However, even when resources are not contingent on citizenship status or don't have an impact on future status, non-citizens may still fear negative repercussions, leading to a "chilling effect" where a household does not access public resources for which they are eligible.^{xiii}

Language Barriers

Language access is a critical barrier for foreign-born populations' ability to access services and is similarly critical in maintaining an individual's engagement with services. Language accessibility includes having verbal translation and written materials that are accessible in one's language of preference, but also includes considering varying levels of literacy.

Barriers Within Homeless Services Delivery Systems

There are numerous factors that lead to Latinos being particularly vulnerable, and these factors go well beyond the scope of homelessness policy and the work of homeless services providers, such as immigration policy. But there are several factors within homeless services systems that perpetuate Latinos' unique vulnerability. These factors include:

- **Cultural competency and representation in homeless services systems:** In many cases, existing services providers may not be designing inclusive spaces that invite Latinos experiencing or at risk of homelessness to access services. This can include lack of language access, lack of Latino representation among the staff of service providers, and other factors. The ways that programs and services are structured may indicate a lack of cultural competency, including a lack of housing resources for families and multigenerational households.

- **First time homelessness:** Latinos are more likely than other populations to be first-time homeless,^{xiv} which means they may be less versed in interacting with traditional points of entry into the homeless services system. Consequently, other neighborhood institutions (such as local churches or health clinics) may be critical partners in reaching this population early on in their housing crisis. Greater incidences of first-time homelessness further suggest that many group members may not be prioritized for services within homeless services systems that target those with the greatest needs (often defined as those experiencing repeated bouts and long-term spells of homelessness).
- **Lack of cross-sector training between immigration legal aid and homeless services:** For the most part, homelessness prevention and mainstream homeless service providers focus their energies on tenant protections and legal aid related to evictions. But legal aid with specialization in immigration issues is especially needed for Latinos at risk of or currently experiencing homelessness who lack citizenship status. This population may require legal assistance obtaining documentation needed to access housing resources and legal advice regarding potential impacts, if any, that accessing benefits may have on their immigration status. Finally, key immigration issues such as an asylum claim, visa status and work permits, verification of residency, or a pending residency application may impact an individual’s eligibility for resources. However, homeless services providers often lack capacity to address these issues and, moreover, may lack adequate partnerships with immigration legal services providers.

COVID-19 and Its Impacts

COVID-19 presented several challenges that had devastating impacts on communities of color. The Latino community was particularly hard hit. By late 2020, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention documented that risk of infection, hospitalization, and death were twice as high for Latinos as compared to their White counterparts.^{xv} Overrepresentation in the essential workforce,^{xvi} lack of access to care, overcrowded housing, and other factors made this group particularly vulnerable to health risks. The economic impacts of COVID-19 were also especially harsh for Latino communities; in April 2020, following widespread shutdowns, the unemployment rate for Latinos had risen to 18.2 percent, compared to 16.6 percent for Black and African Americans and 12.8 percent among Whites.^{xvii}

Table 3. Unemployment Rates by Race, April 2020

Race	Unemployment Rate in April 2020
White	12.8%
Asian	13.7%
Black	16.6%
Latino	18.2%

As the COVID-19 pandemic wore on, many Latino households found themselves behind on rent. According to some surveys, 20 percent of Latino households reported being behind on rent,^{xviii} even as many Latino households decided to forgo critical educational and health-related needs.^{xix}

While the federal government made unprecedented amounts of relief funding available through the federal Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP), augmented Unemployment Assistance, Economic Impact Payments (stimulus payments), and the Child Tax Credit, this assistance was far less likely to reach Latino households than other populations. In California, only 35 percent of applicants for the state-administered rent relief program were Latino, despite Latinos making up 57 percent of the renter population.^{xx} Other data showed Latinos receiving stimulus payments and claiming the Child Tax Credit in smaller numbers than their non-Latino counterparts.^{xxi}

It's unclear how limited access to relief may have slowed economic recovery among Latinos. Another unknown is the tie between the recovery and current strength of the job market and homelessness. If job losses contributed to increases in Latino homelessness, are households encountering barriers to securing new housing after returning to work? Since Latinos were disproportionately impacted by COVID, are incidences of long COVID impacting some people's ability to fully return to work and reconnect to housing? These questions need further exploration to determine the full impact of COVID on Latino populations.

What Should Policymakers Be Doing?

What About Service Providers?

There are several changes that federal policymakers can make to address rising Latino homelessness, along with changes local policymakers and service providers should consider to better serve this growing population.

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Federal Policy Changes

- **Immigration Policy Reform:** At the heart of many of the policy issues outlined in this brief is the federal government's failure to enact significant immigration policy reform. A meaningful pathway to citizenship – along with fixing a process that has led to lengthy backlogs in applications for residency, asylum, and other statuses – are all critical barriers to a significant portion of the Latino population. These barriers prevent many Latinos from being able to fully participate in the economy and, when needed, access crucial safety net resources.^{xxii}

- **Invest in Affordable Housing at Scale:** Congress must significantly increase investment in affordable housing to make major headway on homelessness, regardless of race, ethnicity, or other subpopulation status. While some Latinos will not benefit directly from increased investment in affordable housing due to status restrictions, many thousands will.
- **Create Incentives for Federal Affordable Housing Funding to Build and Preserve Units for Families:** Data shows Latinos are more likely to experience homelessness as part of a family unit,^{xxiii} but many affordable housing programs primarily fund developments that invest in studios and one-bedroom apartments that are not able to accommodate families. Federal policymakers should seek opportunities to create incentives for recipients of affordable housing funding to create units for families.
- **Revisit Immigration Status Restrictions on Federal Housing Funding:** One of the primary barriers for Latinos lacking citizenship and residency status is their ineligibility for federally-supported housing programs, including Housing Choice Vouchers (commonly known as Section 8), public housing, and permanent supportive housing (PSH) funded through the Continuum of Care program. As Congress considers expanding the level of housing resources to meet the needs of the country, it should also revisit these restrictions, which leave many households unable to access an affordable housing unit.
- **Lower Barriers to Services, Including Language Barriers:** The federal government should direct resources toward reducing barriers experienced by underserved populations. If factors such as inadequate language services or inappropriate/insufficient staffing are preventing eligible people from getting the assistance they need, Congress and/or HUD should ensure that communities have designated resources to overcome such barriers.
- **Facilitate Sharing of Information and Emerging Best Practices:** Administrative agencies have a significant role to play in ensuring that programs are effective in reaching their goals. As such, HUD should support efforts to reach these populations through information sharing. For instance, HUD can issue guidance informing communities of ways to ensure that Latinos (and other underserved populations) are able to access homeless and housing services. The agency could also facilitate information sharing among CoCs (highlighting best practices) and offer technical assistance.
- **Greater Availability of Data:** HUD should be a leader in democratizing access to data on Latinos and other subpopulations. Typically, a limited number of CoC administrators have access to data on permanent housing exits of Latinos and other aspects of homeless system performance in relation to this group. A community's service providers, advocates, and researchers should regularly have access to such information. This would improve their ability to contribute to population-specific solutions. HUD should publicly post such local-level data and require CoCs to do so as well. Communities can also voluntarily make relevant data available online.

- **Fund Latino-Focused Research:** Congress and/or HUD should fund research on Latinos (and other potentially underserved populations). To what extent are systems failing to reach members of the group who are living unsheltered? Can evidenced-based best practices be identified to help turn the tide on Latino homelessness? Is the fallout from the pandemic still impacting Latino homelessness? Exploring these questions will help to better serve this population.

State and Local Policy Changes

Local and state actors can:

- **Make Greater Investments in Communication:** Communication is critical. Oftentimes, people in the Latino community are not aware of public resources they are entitled to, regardless of their immigration status. In many cases, homeless services system resources — including some federally-funded resources, such as shelter and Rapid Re-Housing programs funded through the federal Emergency Solutions Grant (ESG) program — are eligible to serve anyone regardless of their immigration status. Proactive, frequent, and consistent communication to the Latino community is essential to ensure heightened awareness of these resources. State and local governments should pursue public awareness campaigns that specifically target this population using Spanish language and other media that reaches Latino households.
- **Reduce Language Access Barriers:** Service providers and people experiencing homelessness often cite language access as a critical gap in serving Latinos at risk of experiencing homelessness.
 - HUD recently proposed^{xxiv} a relevant change to the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), the database system for the homeless services field. Clients would be asked their preferred language. If approved, CoCs would use this information to assess their exact staffing needs — i.e., how many workers should speak Spanish and other languages. Agencies would also use this information in planning, while still recognizing that HMIS data may be failing to capture the language needs of populations that homeless services workers fail to reach. Homeless service systems, as well as systems of care that touch people before they fall into homelessness, must devote resources to increasing language access and ensure that services are available in Spanish, as well as other Indigenous languages that Latino households speak.
- **Strategize Around Rehousing:** Continuing to innovate is important, but communities can begin by employing:
 - *Rapid Re-Housing (RRH).* RRH may be particularly relevant for people experiencing first-time homelessness who may not need an intervention as intensive as PSH. Additionally, RRH can be accessed by individuals regardless of citizenship status.

- *Housing Shares*. Roommate matching can be a helpful solution. Low-wage workers and those with limited government benefits can pool resources to help end their homelessness. This can be an especially effective solution in tight rental markets where available housing units are scarce.
- *Local Resources with Fewer Restrictions than Federal Programs*. So long as federal restrictions persist in providing permanent housing resources based on documentation status, states and localities must consider ways to use local dollars to fill in the gaps. Flexible housing subsidy pools and other interventions funded by state and local resources should make supplemental efforts to serve vulnerable populations excluded from accessing federally-funded programs.
- **Analyzing and Removing Barriers to Shelter:** Local jurisdictions and CoCs should determine if Latinos are accessing shelter at the same rates as other groups. If not, these jurisdictions should consider whether language barriers are evident at system entry points and shelters, if there is sufficient public information available to the Latino community on available services and shelter options, and if available services and shelter options are configured to meet the population's needs (e.g., family shelters).

Communities should also consider additional questions, such as:

1) Does the community need to locate more shelter beds in areas where Latinos live or spend time?

2) Are there shelter structures, rules, or aspects of its culture that are unappealing to Latino groups?

In exploring these questions, communities should engage with Latino community organizations as well as Latinos who have experienced homelessness. With the latter, sources of information may include advisory boards, interviews, surveys, or informal conversations.

- **Consider Additional Data Points and Opportunities to Refine the Point-in-Time Count:** Being counted can be an important avenue toward better targeting of services, and provides critical data to tailor housing solutions effectively.

PIT Count strategies will likely involve considerations outlined earlier in this report. For example, Latino community organizations (and others reaching populations that may sit outside the homeless services system) should engage in conversations about where Latinos experiencing homelessness are likely to be found. PIT Count organizers should recruit counters who speak Spanish and other needed languages, while ensuring recruitment is happening from culturally competent organizations and associations familiar with targeted neighborhoods and their residents.

- **Foster Partnerships Between Immigration Legal Aid and Homeless Services:** The dearth of partnerships between homeless services providers and legal aid providers specializing in immigration issues continues to hamper service delivery to immigrant or mixed status Latino households (i.e., households with both foreign-born and U.S. born members). Local jurisdictions can create collaborative efforts between these two sectors to form partnerships and develop service referral pathways. Local jurisdictions can also fund needed cross-training between these two sectors.

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