

Rational Steps #3: A Collaborative Path Forward to Reduce Homelessness

Welcome to the third installment of my policy series, where we will identify and explore important issues facing our state and recommend workable policy solutions. It is my goal that this series be informative, educational, and an example of how to constructively take rational steps toward a better Washington for all.

- **Issue**: Washington has spent billions during the past decade toward reducing homelessness, only to see the problem grow worse, particularly in the number of homeless living on the street and the chronically homeless. While the rest of the country has seen a decline in both street and chronic homelessness, Washington has seen an explosion, outpacing even California.
- **Rational Step Toward a Better Washington**: Based on a legislative directive, the Ruckelshaus Center, with its long history of making inroads on intractable problems, is facilitating a bipartisan group with a cross-section of perspectives to do a two-year fact-finding mission into homelessness and its causes, and recommend policy solutions to the Legislature.

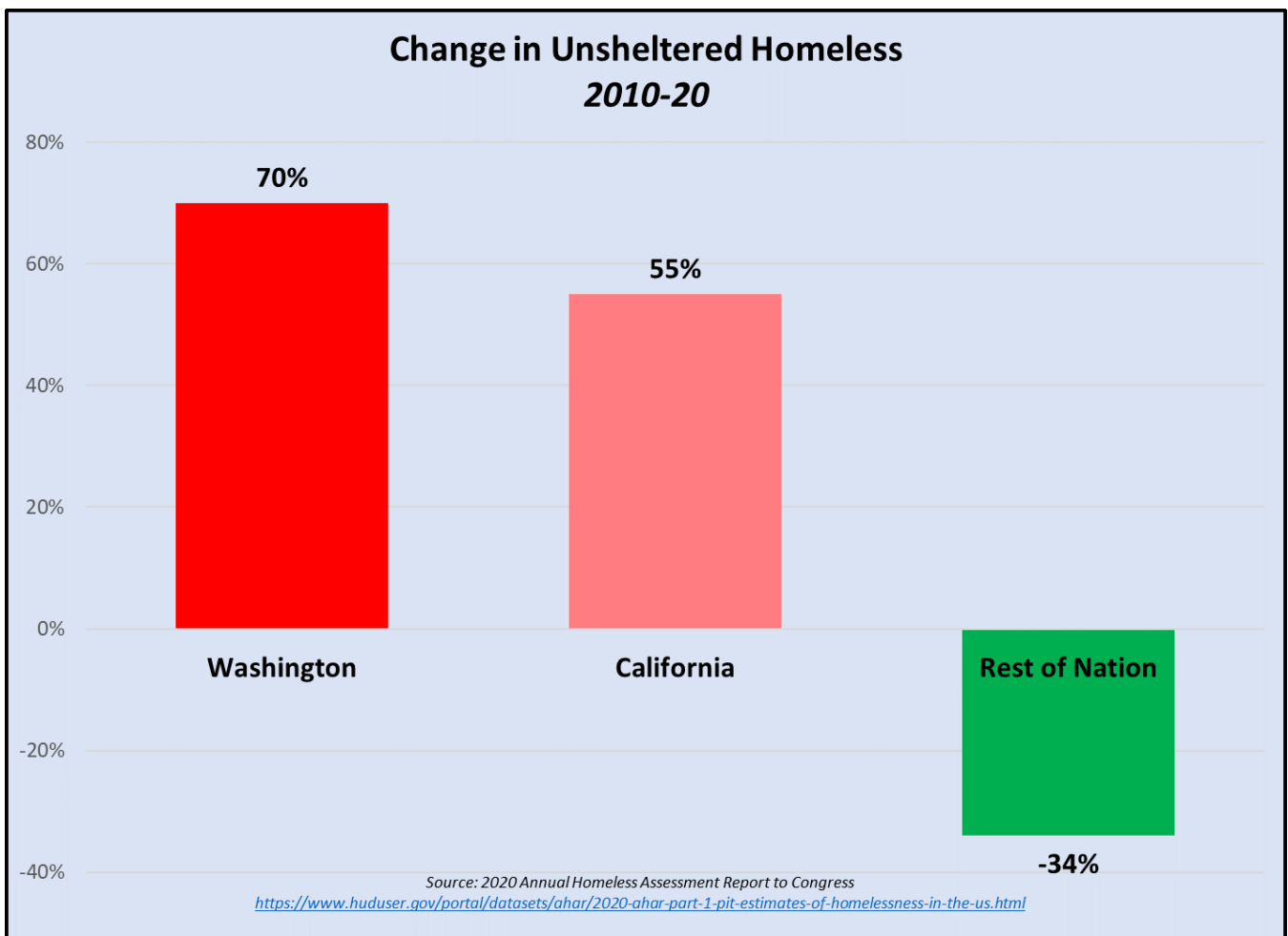
"The number of unsheltered homeless encampments in greenbelts, under bridges, and on our streets is a visible reminder that the current system is not working."

-- from Section 6, House Bill 1277, passed in 2021 (*emphasis added*)

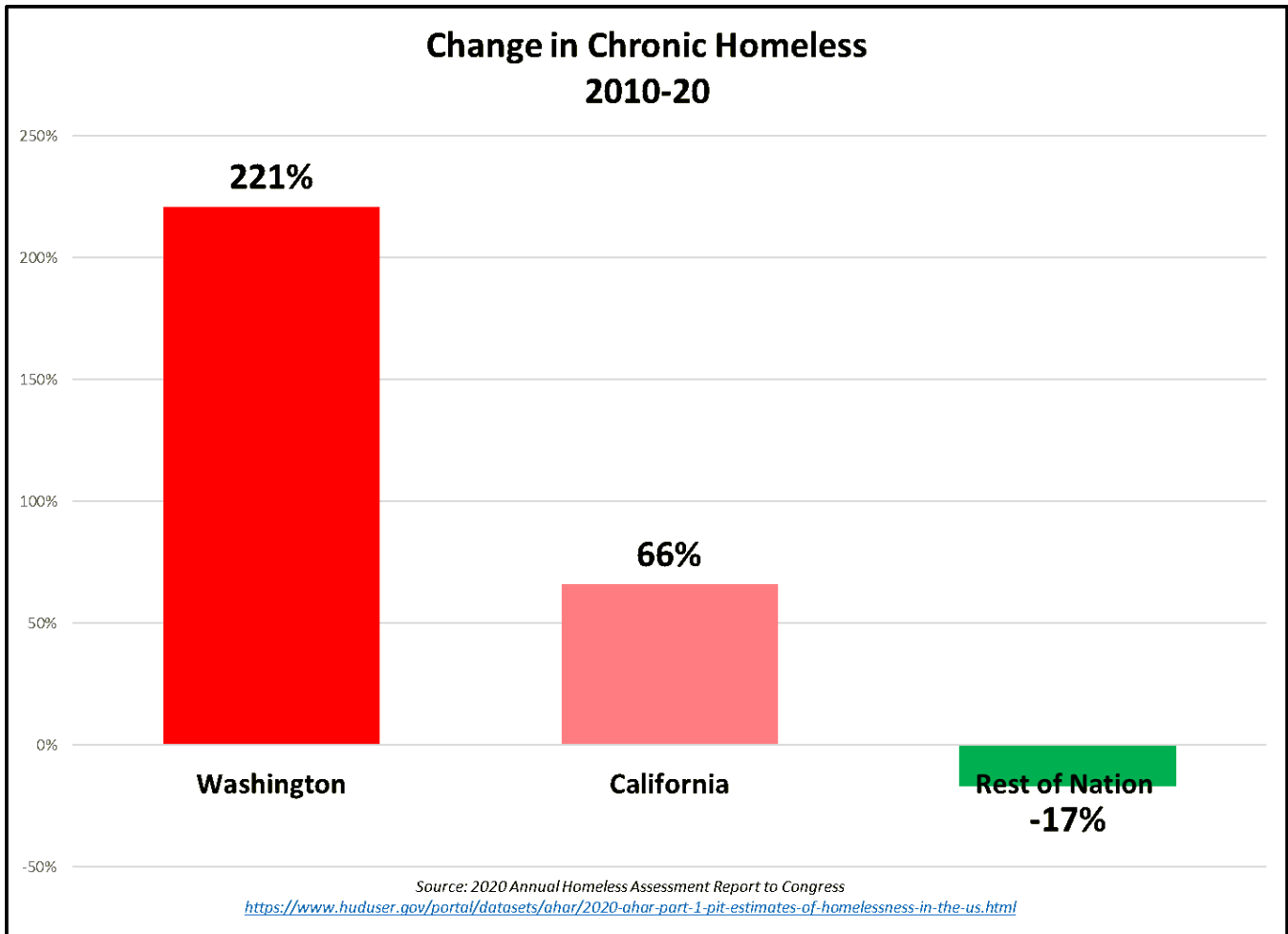
A. Washington ranks 2nd in U.S. for number of chronically homeless

The annual estimate of homelessness in the United States by the federal Housing and Urban Development confirms what our own eyes tell us: Washington's system is not working.¹

Here is what the report found about the change in people living on the street over the past 10 years:



The report found this about chronic homelessness, defined as being homeless continuously for more than one year, or being homeless at least 4 times in last 3 years for a cumulative total of more than 12 months:



Here's another statistic to crystallize how much the past 10 years of efforts have been a failure:

- In 2010, Washington had 1/5 the number of chronically homeless as Florida and 1/3 the amount of Texas.
- In 2020? Washington's total number of chronically homeless has surpassed both Florida and Texas, and now ranks second in the country, trailing only California.²

B. Official Data Significantly Understate Extent of Washington's Homelessness Problem

The count of the homeless is a once-yearly point-in-time effort, for which local governments deserve a ton of credit for undertaking and conducting. But it greatly understates the actual number of homeless.

And here's why: homeless individuals in jail or the hospital on the day of the count are not included in the official tallies of homeless.

How big is this undercount? Look at Thurston County, which to its credit reports on these two sub-categories even though they're not included in the official statewide figure on reported homeless:

- Thurston County Official Homeless Tally (2020): 995 people
- Not included in tally:
 - Homeless in jail on night of count: 242 people
 - Homeless in hospital on night of count: 120 people³

The jail and hospital subpopulations would add almost 40% to the official count of homeless.

And, frankly, the fact that on a given night over 1 in 4 people truly experiencing homelessness (362 of 1,357) are being served in either a jail or a hospital is pretty damning evidence about which institutions are bearing the brunt of this crisis.

C. "Is That Compassion?" – Another Visible Sign of Failure

Speaking of visible signs of failure, a haunting article called, "The Invisible Asylum" was published recently chronicling the homeless situation in Olympia⁴, the state's capitol, which has an unsheltered homeless situation that exceeds Seattle on a per capita basis.⁵ Here are excerpts:

Brandon, who helps manage the mitigation site (an outdoor homeless encampment) for the City of Olympia, tells me that the people arriving here are "in the gutter." He estimates that 95 percent have a substance-abuse disorder and nearly 100 percent have a mental-health condition. Though the city continues to distribute glossy photos from the site's opening day, the reality on the ground is grim—open drug use, fighting, crime, and even a tent filled with used needles. Brandon says that "thousands of rats" have tunneled under the site and will chew through the wooden pallets beneath the tents and the plastic walls of the tiny homes. "There's soy in the plastic," he explains. "It's like candy to rats."

...

According to the crisis workers, it's very hard to get any kind of involuntary detention. Larsen says that the Crisis Response Unit requests only one psychiatric hold evaluation per month, on average, because the standard is so high and varies so widely from doctor to doctor. The people on the streets, most of whom have gone through repeated evaluations, have rehearsed the answers that will get them immediately released: "I'm not a danger to myself or others, I know where I can sleep, I know where I can get food." When I ask the team how difficult it is to get a long-term involuntary commitment at Western State Hospital, their response is unanimous: "Impossible."

In total, according to the latest available [data](#), designated crisis responders filed 1,599 petitions for involuntary holds in Thurston County, and the courts approved only 411 cases for inpatient detention – and the vast [majority](#) of these were for short-term, 14-day holds. To illustrate how challenging it is to secure an involuntary commitment, crisis workers told me that they once found a woman eating a dead rat in an alleyway, but this did not qualify her as “gravely disabled”; the reaction from relevant officials was that “at least she’s eating.”

...

Under the current policy regime, this madness has become an eternal recurrence: the officers will see Marty again tomorrow morning, as he suffers through another drug-terror, and they must leave him to fend for himself.

As we head back to the station, we can still hear Marty’s cries in the distance.

“Is that compassion?” Sergeant King asks, disappearing into the doorway.

Is that compassion? It’s a question that should haunt us all.

D. A New Approach Needed: Ruckelshaus Center to the Rescue?

A broken system, failing people while pronouncing it compassion. Billions spent – over \$2 billion in the current state operating budget alone⁶ – yet the problem is significantly worsening, while the rest of the country sees improvement. Undue strains on jails and hospitals. Public areas no longer frequented by the public, due to safety concerns.

The visible signs of failure abound. And a clear need to do better, but how exactly?

Enter the William D. Ruckelshaus Center, a joint effort of Washington State University and the University of Washington, which has a history of working on intractable problems, bringing people together to address critical – and often seemingly insurmountable – issues.

The Ruckelshaus Center’s mission is to serve as neutral facilitator, not advocate. Most recently, the center did yeoman's work on the issue of services for people with developmental disabilities, a vulnerable population in need of better services and care. This issue is full of political land mines and tribalism that had historically broken into community-service advocates versus state institutional-care proponents.

After a multi-year process that had all interested parties at the table, including bipartisan and bicameral legislative representation, the center produced a consensus report on recommendations to improve care and services – which the Legislature, in historic fashion, essentially enacted during its 2021 session.⁷

Based on that success, and a recognition that homelessness is a critical issue suffering from the same sort of tribalism and entrenchment, the Legislature – through an amendment introduced by

Republicans and adopted in a bipartisan fashion – enacted a directive in 2021 for a similar process regarding homelessness. The key provisions:

The legislature intends to provide for an examination of the economic, social, and health causes of current and expected patterns of housing instability and homelessness, and to secure a common understanding of the contribution each has to the current crisis. **The legislature intends for this examination to result in a widely accepted strategy for identifying how best to address homelessness[.]**

...

The department of commerce must contract with the William D. Ruckelshaus center to conduct an examination of trends affecting, and policies guiding, the housing and services provided to individuals and families who are or at risk of homelessness in Washington. **The center must also facilitate meetings and discussions to develop and implement a long-term strategy to improve services and outcomes for persons at risk or experiencing homelessness and develop pathways to permanent housing solutions. (emphasis added)⁸**

The development of a "widely accepted strategy for identifying how best to address homelessness" involves the Ruckelshaus Center serving as a neutral facilitator to bring interested parties to the table – including providers and advocates for homeless people, businesses, tribes, mental-health and substance-abuse professionals, law enforcement, local governments, the private and public housing industry, government's executive branch and legislators – to do a deep collaborative dive, and build common understanding and consensus.

The directive is a multi-year effort, culminating in a report to the Legislature by December 2023 on how to best improve outcomes and reduce homelessness and housing instability.

Conclusion

Despite investing billions, Washington has seen its homelessness crisis deepen and continue to get worse. The signs of Washington's failures are visible and robust. This is not compassion, it is tragedy.

The tragedy needs to stop, and we simply must do better.

The 2021 bipartisan amendment directing the Ruckelshaus Center to facilitate collaboration among diverse interests, to build common understanding and present a widely accepted strategy that the Legislature can act upon to reduce homelessness, represents a hopeful and rational step forward for a better Washington.

APPENDIX

Ruckelshaus Center Amendment, E2SHB 1277 (2021)

NEW SECTION. Sec. 6. (1)(a) The legislature finds that affordable housing, housing instability, and homelessness are persistent and increasing problems throughout the state. Despite significant increases in financial resources by the federal, state, and local governments to address these problems, homelessness and the risk of becoming homeless has worsened in Washington since the legislature authorized the first homeless housing document recording surcharge in 2005. The number of unsheltered homeless encampments in greenbelts, under bridges, and on our streets is a visible reminder that the current system is not working.

(b) The legislature finds that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and shed new light on the state's homelessness problems and forced communities and providers to reexamine the types and delivery of housing and services to individuals and families who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. As a result of the changing conditions COVID-19 created, the federal government has provided an infusion of funding for housing and services for homelessness populations in its COVID-19 relief bills to pursue different strategies to improve outcomes. Moreover, there are various proposals to increase state funding to address housing insecurity and homelessness, including this act to impose an additional document recording fee to fund an eviction prevention rental assistance program and other services to persons at risk or experiencing homelessness.

(c) The legislature also finds that there are many causes of homelessness and housing instability, including: (i) A shortage of affordable housing; (ii) local land use planning and property management policies that discourage the development of private sector housing stock to serve low and extremely low-income households; (iii) unemployment and lack of education and job skills to acquire an adequate wage job; (iv) mental health, developmental, and physical disabilities; (v) chemical and alcohol dependency; and (vi) family instability and conflict. The legislature intends to provide for an examination of the economic, social, and health causes of current and expected patterns of housing instability and homelessness, and to secure a common understanding of the contribution each has to the current crisis. The legislature intends for this examination to result in a widely accepted strategy for identifying how best to address homelessness in ways that: (A) Address the root causes of the problem; (B) clearly assign responsibilities of state and local government to address those causes; (C) support local control and provision of services at the local level to address specific community needs, recognizing each community must play a part in the solution; (D) respect property owner rights and encourage private sector involvement in solutions and service; and (E) develop pathways to permanent housing solutions and associated services to break the cycle of housing insecurity and homelessness.

(2)(a) The department of commerce must contract with the William D. Ruckelshaus center to conduct an examination of trends affecting, and policies guiding, the housing and services provided to individuals and families who are or at risk of homelessness in Washington. The center must also facilitate meetings and discussions to develop and implement a long-term strategy to improve services and outcomes for persons at risk or experiencing homelessness and develop pathways to permanent housing solutions.

(b) In fulfilling the requirements of this section, the center must work and consult with (i) willing participants representing tribal and local governments, local providers of housing and services for homeless populations, advocates and stakeholders representing the interests of homeless populations, mental health and substance abuse professionals, representatives of the business community and other organizations, and other representatives the center determines is a necessary participant to examine these issues; (ii) a group of legislators consisting of one member from each of the two largest caucuses in the senate and in the house of representatives appointed by the president of the senate and the speaker of the house of representatives, respectively; and (iii) three representatives of the executive branch appointed by the governor.

(c)(i) The center must conduct fact-finding and stakeholder discussions with participants identified in (b) of this subsection. These discussions must identify stakeholder concerns, barriers, opportunities, and desired principles for a long-term strategy to improve the outcomes and services for persons at risk or experiencing homelessness and develop pathways to permanent housing solutions.

(ii) The center must conduct fact-finding and stakeholder discussions with participants identified in (b) of this subsection to identify root causes of housing instability and homelessness within Washington state. This fact-finding should address root causes demographically within subpopulations of persons at risk or experiencing homelessness such as veterans and persons suffering from mental health or substance abuse issues. The fact-finding should also address root causes that may differ geographically or regionally. The fact-finding must identify existing statutory and regulatory issues that impede efforts to address root causes of housing instability and homelessness within Washington state.

(iii) The center must issue two reports of its fact-finding efforts and stakeholder discussions to the governor and the appropriate committees of the house of representatives and the senate. One report on the subjects covered in (c)(i) of this subsection is due December 1, 2021, and one on the subjects covered in (c)(ii) of this subsection is due December 1, 2022.

(d) The center must facilitate discussions between the stakeholders identified in this subsection (2) for the purposes of identifying options and recommendations to develop and implement a long-term strategy to improve the outcomes and service for persons at risk or experiencing homelessness and develop pathways to permanent housing solutions, including the manner and amount in which the state funds homelessness housing and services and performance measures that must be achieved to receive state funding. A report on this effort is due to the governor and the appropriate committees of the house of representatives and the senate by December 1, 2023.

Footnotes

1. 2020 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (Housing & Urban Development), <https://www.huduser.gov/portal/datasets/ahar/2020-ahar-part-1-pit-estimates-of-homelessness-in-the-us.html>
2. Id. (In 2010, Fl - 9,232 chronic homeless; Tx - 6,512; Wa - 2,106. In 2020, Fl - 5,182; Tx - 4,032; and Wa - 6,756)
3. Thurston County Point in Time Homeless Count 2020, https://www.co.thurston.wa.us/health/sscp/PDF/2020%20Point%20in%20Time_Final.pdf (Note: The 120 in medical facilities was Thurston County citing their 2019 figure, as COVID did not allow a 2020 count. See page 40 of report.)
4. "The Invisible Asylum", City Journal (Winter 2021) <https://www.city-journal.org/olympia-washington-mental-hospitals>
5. Olympia in 2020 had 314 unsheltered, for a rate of 565 per 100,000. Seattle had 3,738, for a rate of 507 per 100,000.
6. Senate Ways & Means staff analysis for 2021-23 budget cycle (\$2.2 B in total - \$1 B state (op \$650 & cap \$350), \$1 B federal, and \$200 M in local government funding via state-approved sources)
7. Rethinking Intellectual and Developmental Disability Policy to Empower Clients, Develop Providers, and Improve Services (Nov. 2019) https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2180/2019/12/2019-Ruckelshaus-Workgroup-Report-to-Legislature_Intellectual-Developmental-Disabilities-Policy-1.pdf The 2021 Legislature made significant investments to fulfill recommendations of the Ruckelshaus report, including expanding community residential settings, investing in the Developmental Disabilities trust, rebuild the Fircrest nursing facility, expand family mentor project, develop uniform quality metrics for residential settings, and track and intent to fully fund no-paid services caseload.
8. <http://lawfilesexternal.wa.gov/biennium/2021-22/Pdf/Bills/Session%20Laws/House/1277-S2.SL.pdf?q=20210831113518>