

HOMELESSNESS MYTHS AND FACTS

COMBATting FALSE NARRATIVES

The challenge of homelessness in Colorado can feel insurmountable to community members who are worried about their neighbors, safety in their cities, and compassionate solutions. As homelessness becomes more prevalent and more visible, stances can become more contentious, and myths take over.

The Coalition's decades of research and work with people with lived experience have time and again disproved a number of myths commonly heard. Follow our Myth / Fact guide to learn how to combat false narratives.

MYTH VS FACT

People choose to be homeless. They aren't interested in finding a stable living situation.

In a survey conducted of unhoused people in Colorado in 2023, only 8 out of 825 (less than 1%) respondents said that they would be uninterested in housing were it provided to them.¹ Some people do choose to sleep outside, rather than in a shelter for many reasons, such as policies that prohibit pets, split up couples, or generally because they don't like sharing space with hundreds of other people. The assumption that people "choose" to be homeless is often used to shift the blame from what we know has the biggest impact on homelessness: a lack of affordable housing.

Most unhoused people are addicted to drugs.

In Denver, people experiencing homelessness due to substance use disorders only account for 27% of the total unhoused population.² The leading cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing, unemployment, poverty, and low wages.

People without homes are not working or looking for employment.

53% of adults experiencing sheltered homelessness have earned wages in the year they were unhoused. This number is about 40% for unsheltered people experiencing homelessness.³ It is incredibly difficult to become employed and maintain a job without an address, access to a shower, or other necessities.

MYTH

VS

FACT

Police enforcement and incarceration are the best way to end homelessness. It can even help people to get them into jails for services.

When police criminalize homelessness, they create mistrust in the unhoused community and disconnect people from services. Fewer than 4% of those who are part of "sweeps" are offered services. And going to jail perpetuates the cycle of homelessness—people who have been to prison experience homelessness at a rate seven times greater than the general population.⁴

In addition, courts across the country have found it is unconstitutional to criminalize behaviors that are unavoidable conditions of being human such as sleeping, sitting, standing, etc.

Offering people free housing is too costly for taxpayers to support.

The Coalition has found that we can provide supportive housing and services for approximately \$13,400 per person annually, compared to the \$21,000-\$40,000 spent by taxpayers for medical care, incarceration, detox treatment, and shelter services for each person living on the streets.⁵ Not providing services and assistance to people experiencing homelessness is not only a moral failure, it costs taxpayers more money than providing housing.

Building more housing will solve the housing crisis. It doesn't matter what kind of housing it is, just build more!

According to a Denverite article in June of 2022, there were 21,134 empty apartments in metro Denver; more than enough to assist the estimated 6,000 - 10,000 people experiencing homelessness in the city.⁶ Unfortunately, these are not affordable housing units. Without targeted strategic investments in affordable housing for people at the lowest income, units available in Denver will continue to remain empty and fail to serve our unhoused population. If operators of vacant market rate housing refuse to lower their rents to accommodate those that need housing most, we will never be able to resolve homelessness.