

POLICY BRIEF

FEBRUARY 24, 2021

Homelessness on the decline prior to COVID-19, but challenges remain

KEY FINDINGS

Prior to COVID-19, homelessness had dropped to its lowest point in more than a decade, although it remains prevalent throughout northeastern Illinois.

Progress varies across the region, with greater decreases in homelessness in the suburbs than in Chicago. DuPage County recorded the greatest drop at 60 percent.

The data reflect existing racial and ethnic inequities in the region. In 2019, 68 percent of people experiencing homelessness were Black.

Communities in the region need long-term, permanent solutions that help people access a stable home. [ON TO 2050](#) provides strategies to cultivate support for more housing options.

➔ [Key actions can be found on page 8 of this brief](#)

Executive summary

Homelessness in northeastern Illinois dropped to its lowest point in more than a decade prior to COVID-19, according to a new analysis by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). There were 7,573 people experiencing homelessness in 2019 — a 20 percent decrease since 2014. This progress could be quickly undone, however, without interventions to prevent a COVID-19-fueled wave of evictions.

Progress was uneven across the region. Suburban areas, DuPage County in particular, saw significantly greater drops in homelessness. Meanwhile, racial and ethnic inequities remain a challenge: In 2019, most of the homeless population was Black, a share that has increased in recent years.

The findings demonstrate a demand for affordable and accessible housing — particularly amid a pandemic and economic downturn. ON TO 2050, the region’s long-range plan, recommends expanding housing options to serve all residents.

Understanding how many people are experiencing homelessness in northeastern Illinois, who they are, and how the data have changed over time, is critical to developing more equitable programs and policies in the region.

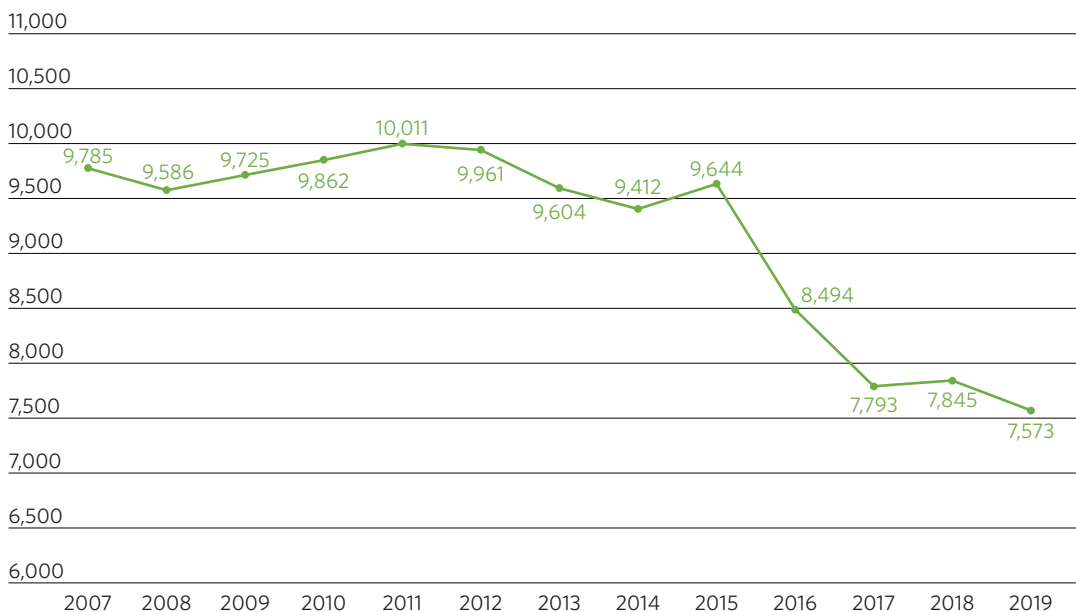
How many people are experiencing homelessness in the region?

On a winter night in 2019, volunteers counted 7,573 people experiencing homelessness^[1] in northeastern Illinois. **Although that number reflects a 20 percent decrease since 2014**, homelessness remains a significant issue in the region.

From 2007 to 2015, homelessness was relatively stable. About 1 out of every 1,000 people in the region was homeless. Most (80 percent) were sheltered — that is, residing in [emergency shelters](#), [transitional housing](#) (temporary housing with services to support transition to permanent housing), or [safe havens](#) (transitional housing for the chronically homeless, particularly those with severe mental illness).

Homeless point-in-time count in northeastern Illinois, 2007-19

● Homeless count



Source: CMAP analysis of HUD point-in-time count data as of November 30, 2020.

Even as the economy began to recover after the 2008 recession, the homeless population did not begin to decline until after 2016. Most of that progress came from the sheltered homeless finding more permanent housing. Some of the decline is because homeless service providers switched to a housing first model, which prioritizes rapid re-housing and permanent supportive housing over transitional housing. More homeless prevention resources increased around that time as well. The number of people experiencing homelessness while unsheltered remained about the same.

The count in 2019 — 7,573 individuals experiencing homelessness in the metropolitan Chicago region — is the lowest in more than a decade. Most are sheltered: 71 percent in emergency shelters, 28 percent in transitional housing, and about 1 percent in safe haven programs.

Over time, the number of homeless staying in emergency shelters has increased, while the percentage of those in transitional housing has decreased. This is due, in part, to a focus by federal programs on rapid re-housing — moving people into permanent housing as quickly as possible — rather than on transitional housing. Studies have shown

that permanent affordable housing with vital support services saves taxpayers money by reducing frequent encounters with emergency rooms, jails, and shelters.

The homeless count highlights not only a need for robust economic growth that includes all residents, but also a demand for affordable and accessible housing that fits each household's preferences. ON TO 2050 recognizes [barriers to housing choice](#) and provides strategies that call on local leaders, service providers, partners, and residents to cultivate support for more housing options.

Where are people experiencing homelessness?

Although the number of people experiencing homelessness has declined since the last recession, progress varies across the region. The biggest decreases have been in the suburbs, while Chicago has seen a smaller decline.

From 2007 to 2019, DuPage County recorded the greatest percentage reduction in homelessness (457 fewer individuals or a 60 percent decrease), followed by Lake County (244 fewer individuals or a 49 percent decrease) and McHenry County (94 fewer individuals or a 37 percent decrease).

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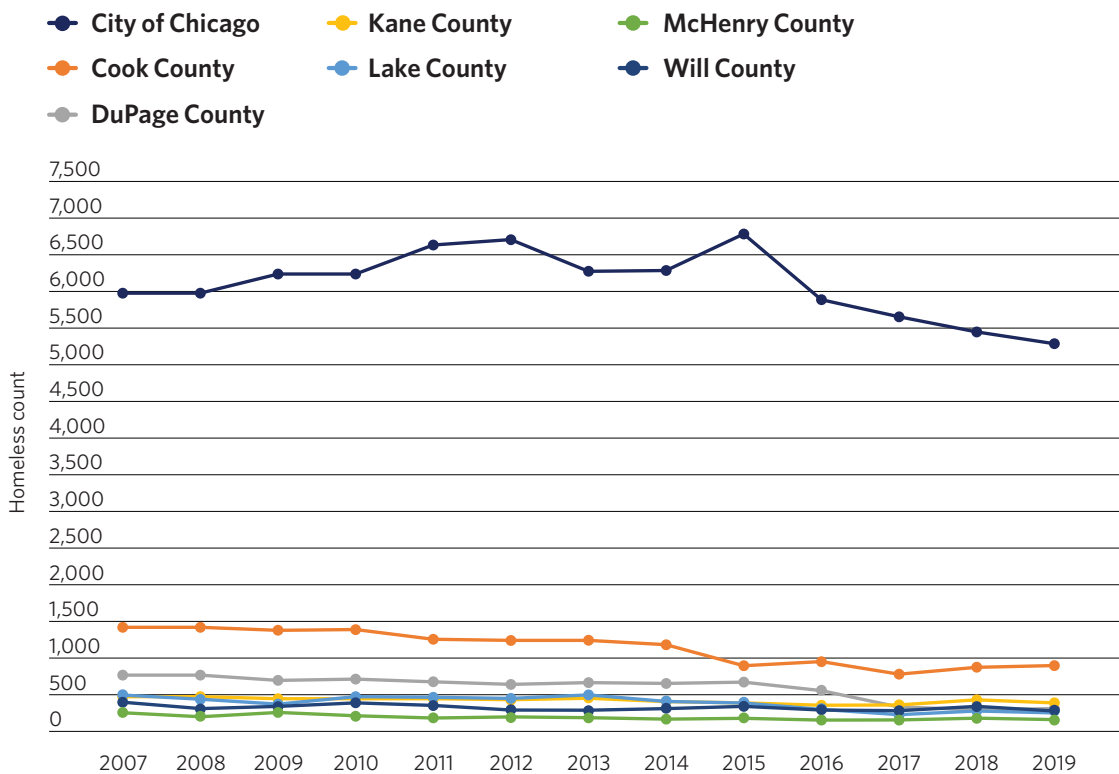
DuPage County, which began work on its 10-year Plan to End Homelessness in 2003, has been an early leader in long-range planning for homelessness. In a report on plan progress, the county noted the development of new permanent supportive housing as one key area of success.

More than half of the region's homeless population is located in Chicago. Earlier in the pandemic, advocacy organizations in Chicago mobilized to [reduce crowding](#) in shelters and provide services to residents. They pushed the city to [provide](#) portable bathrooms and sinks at homeless encampments to make up for closed public spaces. The City of Chicago

also rented hotel rooms to allow isolation for individuals who are homeless and at high risk of COVID-19 complications.

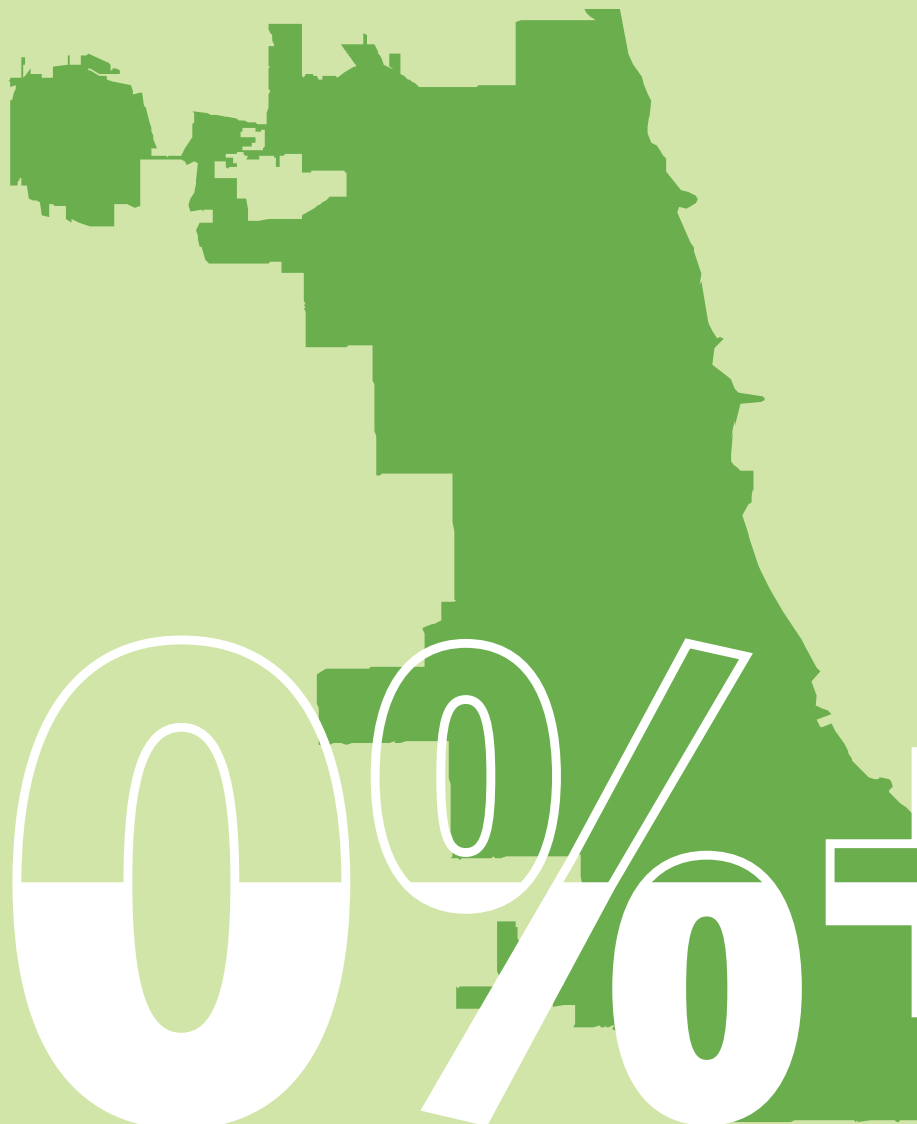
But these actions are only temporary. Communities in the region need long-term, permanent solutions that help people access a stable, affordable home. ON TO 2050 [encourages](#) local governments to align zoning, approval processes, building codes, and inspections to generate more housing options and [calls on](#) housing leaders to continue to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of housing subsidy programs.

Homeless point-in-time count by area, 2007-19



Source: CMAP analysis of HUD point-in-time count data as of November 30, 2020.

More than half of the region's homeless population has been in Chicago.



50%+

Who is experiencing homelessness?

Some groups in the region are more likely to experience homelessness than others are.

Race

Between 2015 and 2019, most people experiencing homelessness have been Black (although Black people represent less than 17 percent of the region's total population). In 2019, 68 percent of people experiencing homelessness were Black, 29 percent were White, 1 percent were Asian, and 2 percent identified as multiple races. Additionally, 12 percent of those experiencing homelessness identified as Latino.

While the number of Black people experiencing homelessness in the region declined between 2015 and 2019, the share of the homeless population that is Black increased. This racial disparity is not unique to northeastern Illinois: While Black people represent 13 percent of the general U.S. population, they [account](#) for 40 percent of people experiencing homelessness and more than half of families with children facing these circumstances.

Northeastern Illinois must remove barriers to residents' economic prospects, health, and overall quality of life. Black adult men in the region are most likely to face homelessness, as well as other [disparities in economic outcomes](#). During 2005-16, [labor force participation](#) rates among the region's Black residents were at least 5 percentage points below any other racial group.

Age

Adults age 25 and older make up about two-thirds of the homeless population, followed by children younger than 18 (24 percent) and young adults 18-24 (9 percent). In 2019, Lake County had the highest percentage of youth experiencing homelessness (26 percent), while Kane County had the smallest percentage (10 percent).

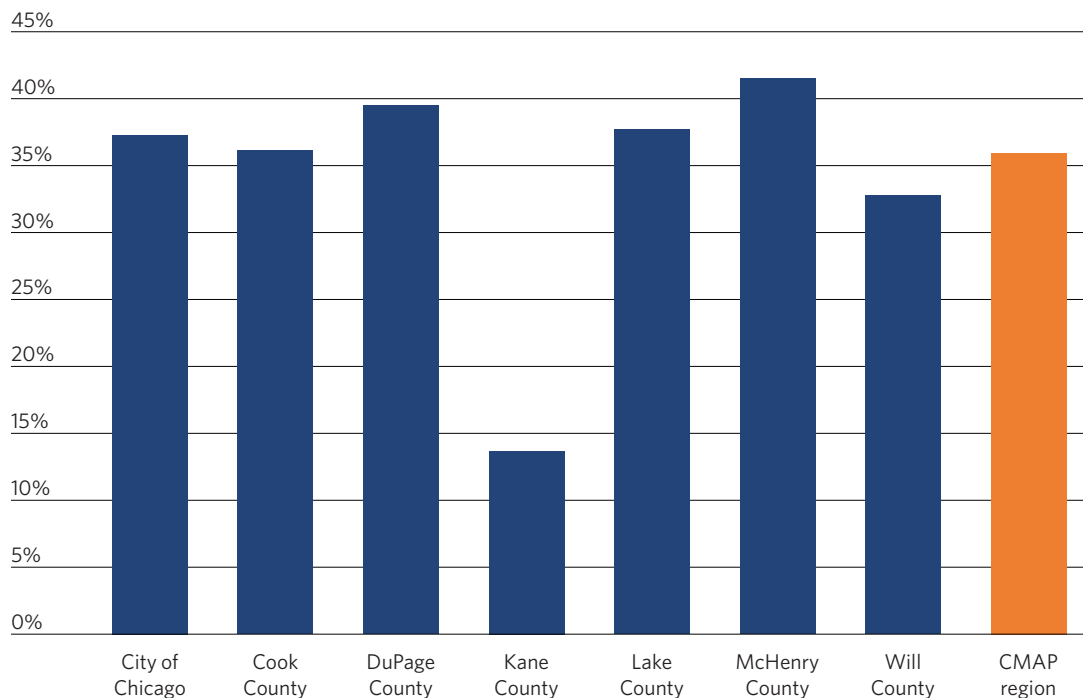
Household type

Both individuals and families can be homeless. Following the 2008 economic recession, the region saw a surge of families facing homelessness. But family homelessness began to ebb by 2011, and since then the regional rate has remained in the range of 35 to 39 percent. Between 2007 and 2016, at least half of the homeless population in DuPage County were families, the highest percentage share in the region.

As of 2019, McHenry County had the highest percentage of families experiencing homelessness (42 percent), followed by DuPage County (39 percent) and Lake County (38 percent). Kane County has had the lowest share of families experiencing homelessness. Today, the COVID-19 crisis threatens to put more families with low incomes at risk of homelessness, as they struggle to juggle work and remote learning or face new financial challenges.

In 2019, **68% of the homeless population was Black.**

Share of families in homeless population by area, 2019



Source: CMAP analysis of HUD point-in-time count data as of November 30, 2020.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines homelessness by four categories. [Please see this list](#) for an in-depth overview of the definition of the following categories: Category 1: Literally homeless, Category 2: Imminent risk of homelessness, Category 3: Homeless under other federal statutes, and Category 4: Fleeing/attempting to flee domestic violence.

About the data

This analysis uses 2019 point-in-time count data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to explore homelessness in northeastern Illinois. The [point-in-time](#) (PIT) homeless count is an annual street and shelter count that determines the number of people experiencing homelessness on a single night during the last 10 days in January. Factors such as weather, shelter space, survey volunteers, and responses can influence the count. PIT data provide counts for sheltered and unsheltered persons experiencing homelessness by household type and subpopulation.

In northeastern Illinois, Continuum of Care (CoC) — groups of local organizations involved with homelessness services — conduct annual PIT counts of individuals experiencing homelessness, whether sheltered or unsheltered. Each PIT count is planned and coordinated locally. The region consists of seven jurisdictions, each represented by a local CoC: IL-500 McHenry County CoC; IL-502 Waukegan, North Chicago/Lake County CoC; IL-506 Joliet, Bolingbrook/Will County, which also covers Kendall and Grundy Counties; IL-510 Chicago CoC; IL-511 Cook County CoC; IL-514 DuPage County CoC; IL-517 Kane County CoC.

Key actions

Local officials and other stakeholders must take a variety of strategies to address and prevent homelessness in northeastern Illinois:

- ➡ **Reach out to the Continuum of Care for your area to learn what local partners are doing:** [Chicago](#), [DuPage County](#), [Kane County](#), [Lake County](#), [McHenry County](#), [Suburban Cook County](#), [Will County](#) (includes Kendall and Grundy Counties)
- ➡ **Connect people with emergency resources.** Helping residents and landlords access emergency rental assistance during COVID-19 could help reduce the number of people who become homeless.
- ➡ **Strengthen homeless outreach efforts.** Local officials can work closely with Continua of Care to understand how to best support service providers in their outreach efforts.
- ➡ **Support rapid re-housing.** This may include recruiting landlords to work with Continua of Care to provide housing for those experiencing or at risk of homelessness, or reducing barriers to getting people re-housed.
- ➡ **Offer transportation assistance.** Measures like providing discounted fares for those with low incomes or medical outreach to “continuous riders” on transit can help fight homelessness and poverty.
- ➡ **Assess how to provide housing locally.** COVID-19 highlighted the need for more types of housing for people experiencing homelessness, most notably crisis housing and shelters.

