Minnesota Homeless Study
A Project of Wilder Research

Enduring Histories of Displacement

Understanding the disproportionate impact of homelessness on Native American Minnesotans

The Wall of Forgotten Natives, Minneapolis (2019). Photo by Dan Huiting.

Homelessness is a result of multiple system failures.

This includes a profound shortage of housing for people with extremely low incomes, as well as inadequate systems to support complex, interrelated needs. In addition to a lack of housing, homelessness can be caused and sustained by trauma, systemic racism, unemployment, or personal health challenges. As a result, homelessness is different for every person who experiences it.

Decades of federal- and state-level data have shown that homelessness disproportionately impacts Native Americans. The trauma of forced displacement, child removal, and assimilation has left deep scars on generations of Native American families. Beyond history, there are lingering biases—built into current systems, practices, and mindsets—that perpetuate racial disparities in homelessness.

This brief explores data from the Minnesota Homeless Study, illustrating outcome differences between those who identify as Native American and those who do not, as well as strategies for breaking the cycle of homelessness. Findings from the Reservation Homeless Study were published separately in 2025.

Issue Brief

This brief is part of a series that examines interview data from the 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study. Each report explores a specific aspect of homelessness and provides detailed data that can be used to inform services, interventions, and policies across our state.

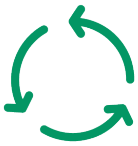
For all available results from the study, as well as the Reservation Homeless Study, visit **mnhomeless.org**.

Executive summary

Mni Sóta Makoce (Land Where the Water Reflects the Clouds) is the Dakota name for the place that is now called Minnesota. Minnesota shares geography with 11 federally recognized Tribal nations and is home to over 80,000 Native American people.[1] Historical and ongoing persecution of Native American communities in Minnesota and the United States (including genocide, forced displacement and assimilation, coercive relocation, boarding schools, and cultural oppression) have created and reinforced vast generational disparities in wealth, homeownership, and homelessness.[2]

Key findings

Native Americans experience homelessness at much higher rates than other groups, reflecting a long history of forced displacement and oppressive policies.



Compounding generational and childhood traumas make the cycle of homelessness difficult to break.

An alarming number of Native American adults who are experiencing homelessness are outside, unsheltered.

High rates of substance use and mental health disorders make it difficult to access and maintain stable housing.

Many Native American women experiencing homelessness are victims of violence and exploitation before and during their time without housing.

In the face of these adversities and traumas, people who were interviewed as part of the Homeless Study shared several sources of strength: their **determination, love and responsibility for their children**, and **resiliency**. These are the most common factors that keep people moving forward despite very difficult circumstances.

It is important to recognize these strengths while also acknowledging that these strengths are repeatedly tested by systems that fail Native American families. It is our collective responsibility to see these system failures and work towards repairing them so that all Minnesotans have a safe place to call home.

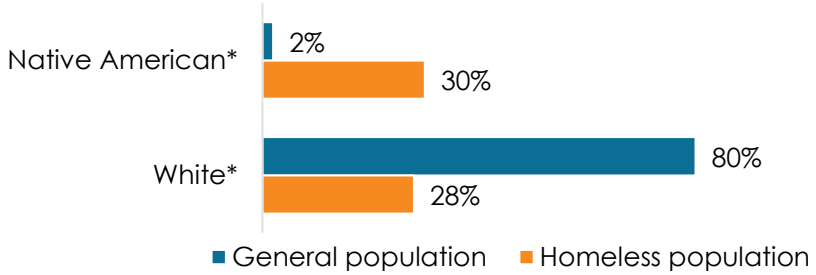
[1] Minnesota Compass. (2024). *All Minnesotans by race & ethnicity.* https://www.mncompass.org/topics/demographics/race-ethnicity?american-indian

[2] Micucci, J. (2023). *Rooted in Trauma: Homelessness in Native Communities.* National League of Cities. https://www.nlc.org/article/2023/03/15/rooted-in-trauma-homelessness-in-native-communities/

Native Americans experience homelessness at much higher rates than other groups, reflecting a long history of forced displacement and oppressive policies.

While Native Americans make up 2% of Minnesota's adult population, they represent 30% of adults interviewed in the 2023 Minnesota and Reservation Homeless Studies (Figure 1).[3] This disproportionality is larger for Native Americans than any other racial or ethnic group. (*Note:* Figure 1 is the only place in the report that combines Minnesota and Reservation Homeless Study data.)

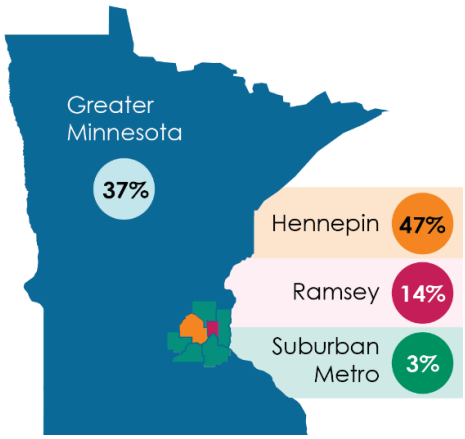
1. Disparities in rates of homelessness among Native Americans compared to their share of Minnesota's overall population



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews, 2023 Reservation Homeless Study interviews (with permission from participating tribes), and 2023 data from the U.S. Census Bureau.
* Respondents could choose more than one racial or ethnic identity. This table presents the proportion of respondents who identified as Native American (either alone, or in combination with other races and ethnicities) and those who identified as White alone (no other races or ethnicities).

Some community members may be transitory, moving back and forth between reservations and the Twin Cities metro. However, nearly half of Native Americans experiencing homelessness, **not on a Native American reservation**, were located in Hennepin County (Figure 2). Historical federal policies are key (though just one part of the equation) to understanding why urban areas such as Hennepin County have such a high proportion of Native Americans experiencing homelessness.

2. Region respondents were staying the night of the study



Note. Does not include 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data (reported separately).

The American Indian Relocation Program

In the 1950s, the federal government began encouraging Native Americans to relocate from their reservations to several U.S. cities, including Minneapolis.[4] Native American families were given a free one-way ticket; limited financial assistance; and the promise of vocational training, good jobs, and a high quality of life. In reality, Native American families faced housing and job shortages, prejudice, and disconnection from their traditional food systems and cultural and community resources.

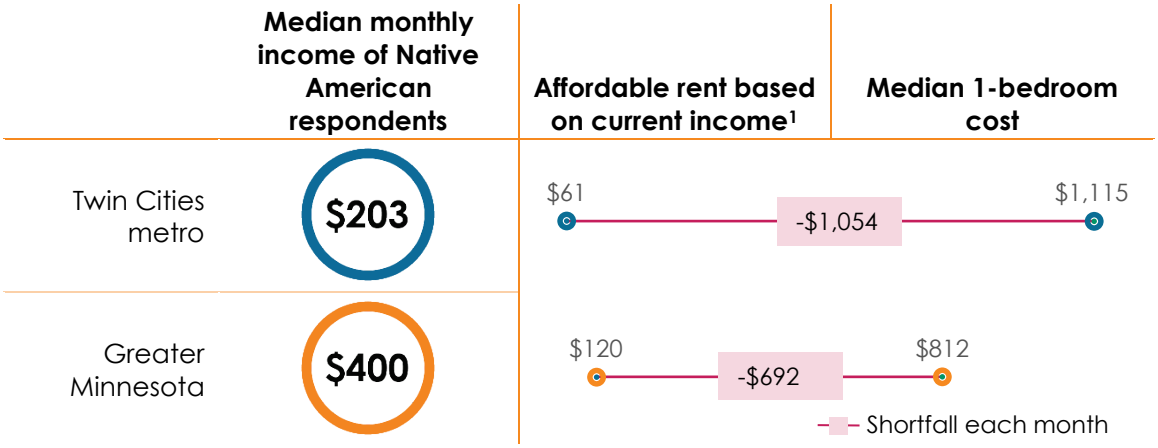
[3] U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *Population and Housing Unite Estimates Program, 2023 Vintage.* https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/popest.html .
[4] Nesterak, M. (2019, November 1). Uprooted: The 1950s plan to erase Indian Country. *APM Reports.* https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2019/11/01/uprooted-the-1950s-plan-to-erase-indian-country

Historical federal policies also have lasting ripple effects that reinforce the cycle of homelessness, particularly in generational wealth and the ability to afford housing.[5]

Lack of affordable housing is a pressing challenge in both greater Minnesota and the Twin Cities metro. Median income for Native American adults experiencing homelessness is nowhere near adequate to cover median rent prices, just $400 per month in greater Minnesota and only $203 per month in the Twin Cities metro (Figure 3). Housing is considered affordable if the occupant spends 30% or less of their income on housing costs—which, for Native Americans experiencing homelessness, would be $61 per month in the Twin Cities metro and $120 per month in greater Minnesota.[6]

With median rent prices at $1,115 per month in the Twin Cities, **Native Americans experiencing homelessness would need to earn 5.5 times more per month than they currently do just to cover the cost of rent**.

3. Median monthly income for Native American adults experiencing homelessness, compared to median monthly rent in 2023



Source for median monthly rent: Housing Link. (2024). *Rental Revue* data.
Note. Does not include 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data (reported separately).
[1] Based on their current income, this is the most (30%) that respondents should pay in order for their housing to be considered affordable.

[5] Gordon, H. S. J., Around Him, D., & Jordan, E. (2022). *Federal policies that contribute to racial and ethnic health inequities and potential solutions for Indigenous children, families, and communities.* Child Trends. https://www.childtrends.org/publications/federal-policies-contribute-racial-ethnic-health-inequities-potential-solutions-indigenous-children-families-communities

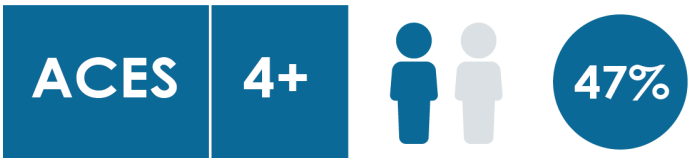
[6] U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. https://archives.hud.gov/local/nv/goodstories/2006-04-06glos.cfm

Compounding generational and childhood traumas make the cycle of homelessness difficult to break.

The traumas that people experience early in life can have a profound impact on their health and well-being. Adverse childhood experiences (or ACEs) can cause children to experience high levels of stress for extended periods of time; this "toxic stress" can impact children's brain development and contribute to long-term cognitive, behavioral, and physical health problems.[7]

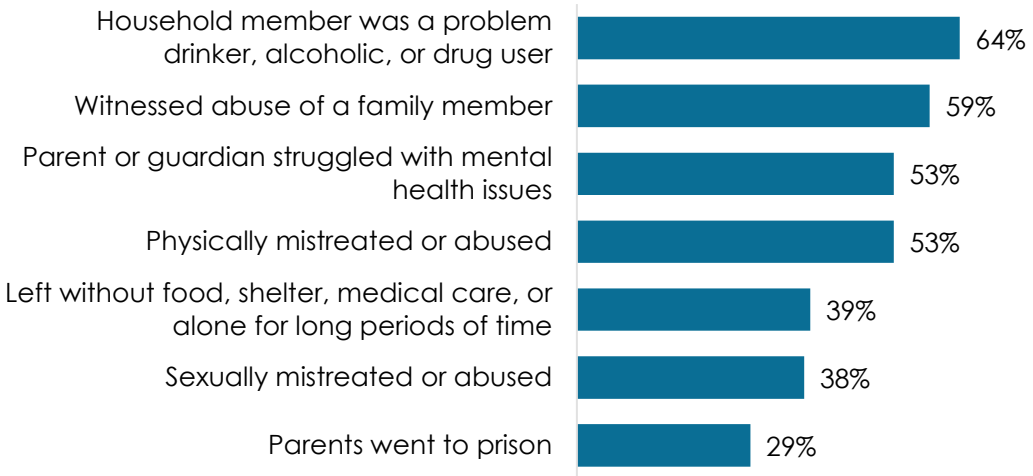
Research has found that individuals who have experienced four or more ACEs are at heightened risk of negative health outcomes, particularly substance misuse and attempted suicide.[8] Respondents from all racial and ethnic groups reported high rates of ACEs, but rates reported by Native Americans experiencing homelessness were among the highest of any group.

Nearly half of Native American adults experiencing homelessness had 4 or more ACEs.



More than half of Native Americans experiencing homelessness said that, during childhood, they lived with a household member who struggled with substance abuse, witnessed abuse of a family member, had a parent or guardian struggle with mental health issues, and/or were physically mistreated or abused (Figure 4).

4. ACEs among Native American adults experiencing homelessness



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews. Does not include 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data (reported separately).

Underlying these experiences is the systemic genocide and forced assimilation of Native Americans in the history of the United States, which means that everyone in the community has been impacted by trauma going back many generations.[9]

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[7] U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2024). *About Adverse Childhood Experiences.* https://www.cdc.gov/aces/about/index.html

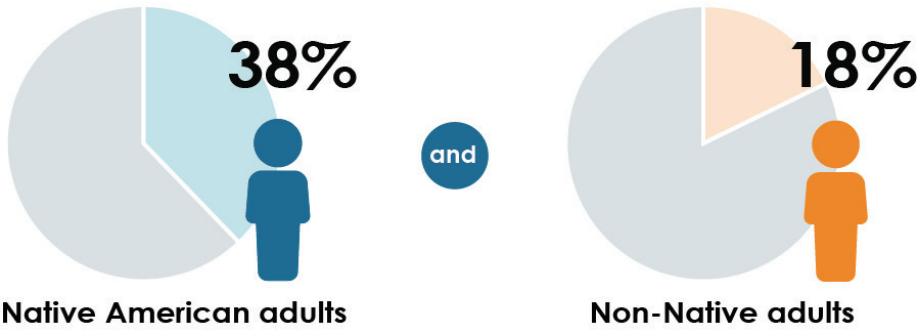
[8] Hughes, K., Bellis, M. A., Hardcastle, K. A., Sethi, D., Butchart, A., Mikton, C., Jones, L., Dunne, M. P. (2017). The effect of multiple adverse childhood experiences on health: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Public Health, 2.* https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lanpub/PIIS2468-2667%2817%2930118-4.pdf

[9] Evans-Campbell, T. (2008). Historical trauma in American Indian/Native Alaska Communities: A multilevel framework for exploring impacts on individuals, families, and communities. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 23*(3).

An additional childhood trauma, not included in the list of ACEs above, is involvement in the child welfare system. Native American children are grossly overrepresented in child welfare systems, a continuation of centuries of federal policies—including boarding schools and the adoption era—that forcibly removed Native American children from their families, Tribes, and cultural networks.[10]

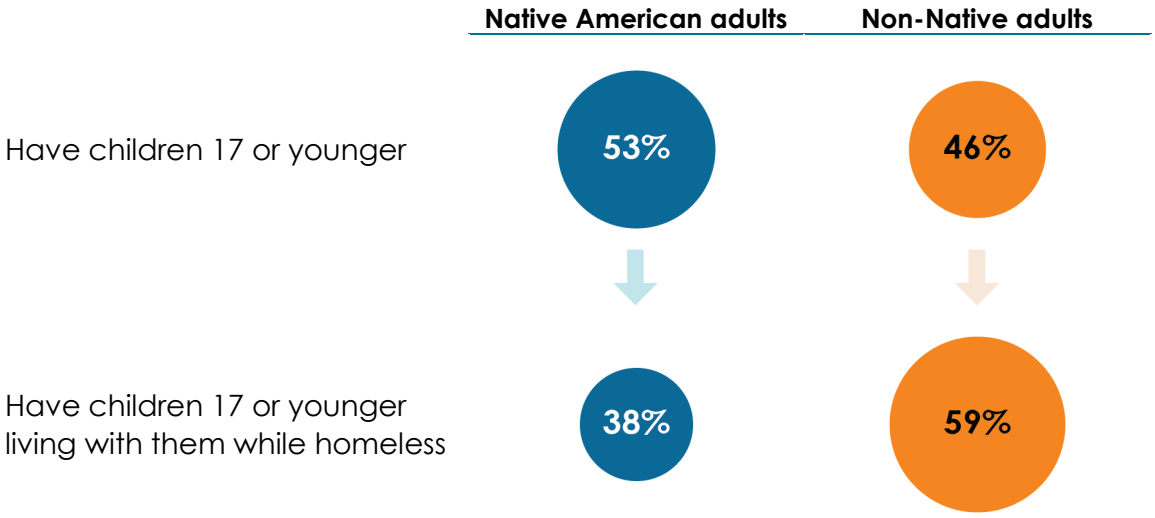
Native American adults experiencing homelessness more often have lived in a foster home (38%), compared to non-Native adults (18%; Figure 5). Among Native Americans who had lived in a foster care placement, over half (52%) said they had run away from their placement (compared to 36% of non-Native adults).

5. Adults experiencing homelessness who have lived in a foster home



Roughly half of all adults experiencing homelessness have children age 17 or younger, regardless of Native American identity (Figure 6). However, just 38% of Native American parents had at least one of their minor children living with them, compared to 59% of non-Native adults. While Homeless Study data do not examine the reasons why children may not be living with their parent experiencing homelessness, this clear gap may be reflective of a continued cycle of separation and potential trauma for Native American families.

6. Parents of minor children and proportion of parents who have minor children living with them while homeless, by Native American identity



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews. Does not include 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data (reported separately).

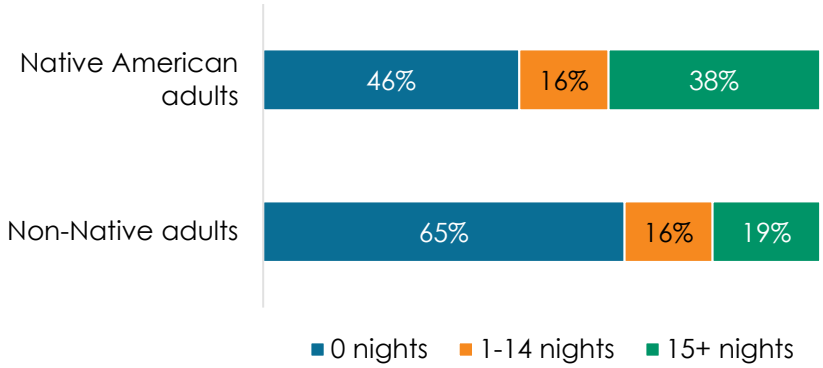
[10] National Indian Child Welfare Association. (n.d.) *History of boarding schools.* https://www.nicwa.org/resources/boarding-schools/

An alarming number of Native American adults who are experiencing homelessness are outside, unsheltered.

Disparities within the overall homeless population are mirrored in the unsheltered population. Over half (54%) of Native American homeless adults had spent at least one night outside in the past month, compared to 35% of non-Native homeless adults. This includes 38% who spent more than half the month unsheltered, a rate **two times higher** than non-Native adults (Figure 7).

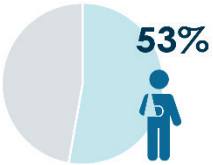
In contrast, a smaller proportion of Native Americans had spent time in a shelter over the past month (61%, compared to 78% of non-Native adults).

7. Nights spent outside in the past 30 days, by Native American identity



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews. Does not include 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data (reported separately).

Sleeping outside creates additional vulnerability for people who are already dealing with a variety of personal and systemic challenges.



Over half (53%) of Native Americans experiencing unsheltered homelessness (15+ nights outside in the past month) have been attacked or assaulted while homeless.

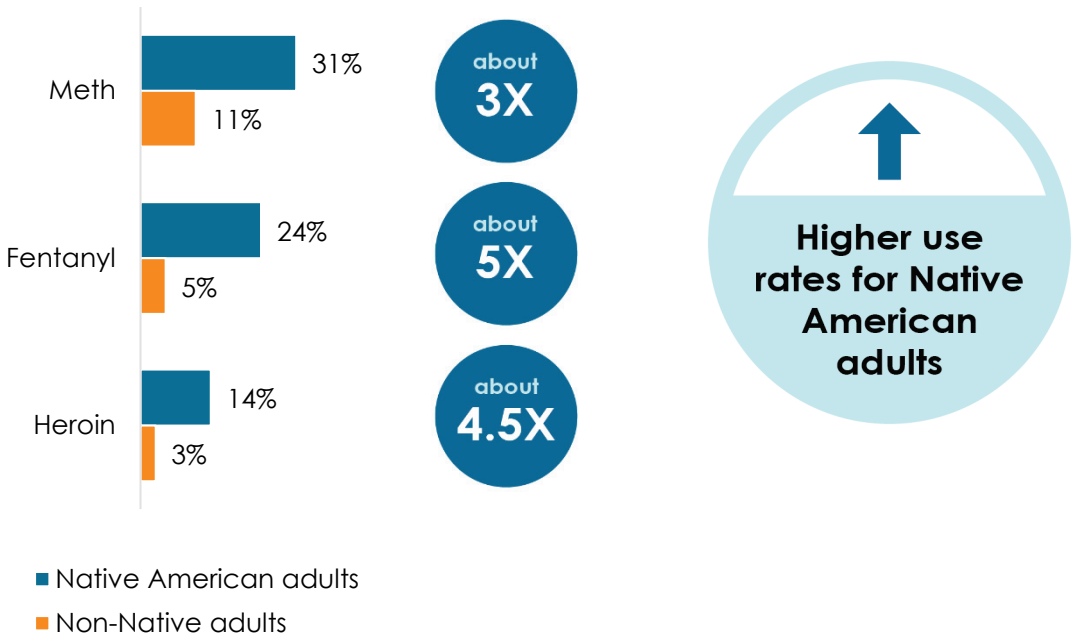
High rates of substance use and mental health disorders make it difficult to access and maintain stable housing.

Substance use and mental health disorders can be both a contributor to homelessness, and make it more difficult for individuals experiencing homelessness to access shelter or stable housing. Additionally, experiencing homelessness (and in particular, unsheltered homelessness) may compel individuals to turn to substances to find reprieve from the stressors of daily life, and may exacerbate the symptoms of their mental health disorders.

Nearly 4 out of 10 Native Americans experiencing homelessness have a substance use disorder.

Native Americans experiencing homelessness report high rates of substance use in the past month (Figure 8), in particular, fentanyl—five times higher than non-Native adults—and methamphetamines—almost three times higher than non-Native adults.

8. Substance use in past 30 days

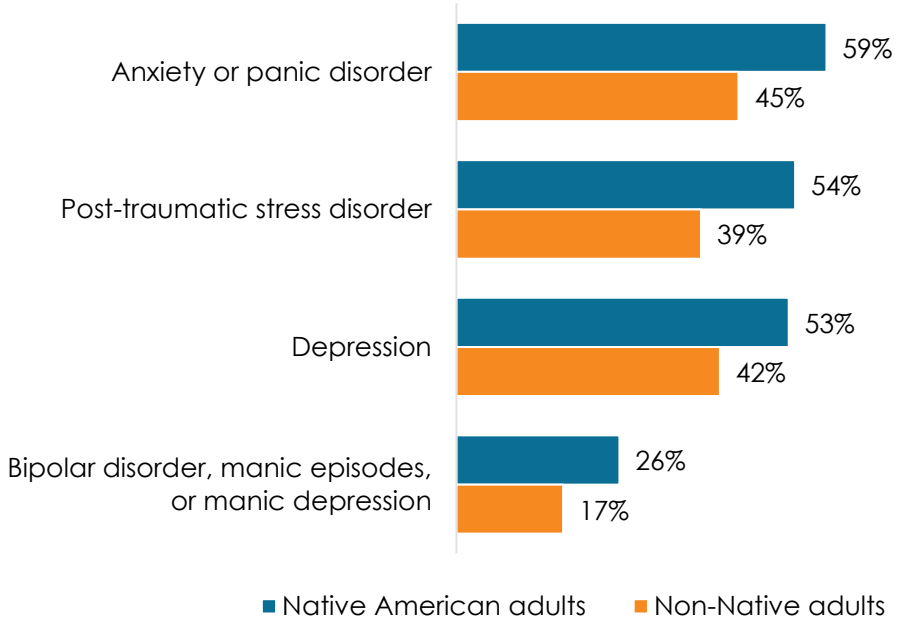


Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews. Does not include 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data (reported separately).

Native Americans experiencing homelessness were nearly **three times more likely to experience an overdose in the past year** (17%), compared to non-Native adults (6%). While a shocking statistic, this is actually an undercount because the Minnesota Homeless Study only accounts for non-fatal overdoses. For information on fatal overdoses, see the Minnesota Department of Health's Minnesota Homeless Mortality Report, 2017-2021.

Mental health also plays a key role in continuing the cycle of homelessness and can be intertwined with substance use. Most adults experiencing homelessness across all racial and ethnic groups reported a significant mental health issue, including two-thirds (67%) of Native Americans. The most common mental health conditions reported were an anxiety or panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression (Figure 9). In all cases, rates were higher than non-Native adults.

9. Mental health conditions



Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews. Does not include 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data (reported separately).

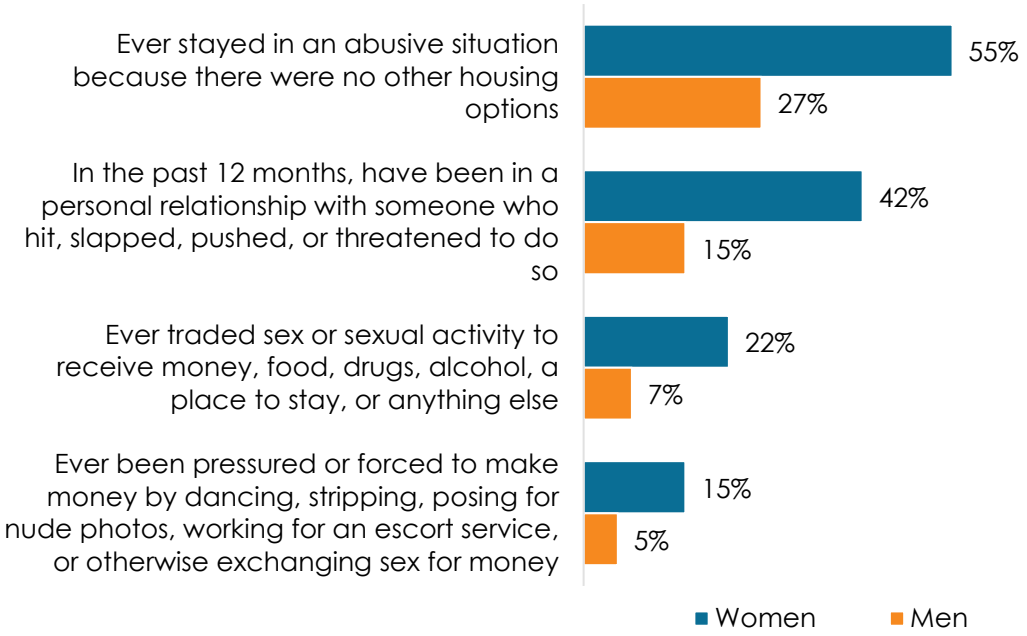
Many Native American women experiencing homelessness are victims of violence and exploitation before and during their time without housing.

Native American adults experiencing homelessness are at high risk for being the victim of violence. For example, 44% have been attacked or assaulted while homeless, compared to 33% of non-Native adults. Violence and exploitation can be both a cause of homelessness and a result of the unsafe situations in which homeless adults often need to stay.

For women—who account for nearly half of Native American adults experiencing homelessness—rates of intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation are higher than for Native American men (Figure 10).[11] Across all racial and ethnic groups, women experience violence more often than men. Native American adults who identify as Two-Spirit, transgender, or non-binary also had higher rates of intimate partner violence and sexual exploitation, but because the number in the study is so small, we do not report their results here.

- Over half of Native American women experiencing homelessness have stayed in an abusive situation because they had no other housing options, compared to roughly one-quarter of Native American men.
- Native American women were three times as likely to have engaged in survival sex to meet their basic needs, and three times as likely to have been pressured or forced to engage in sex work, compared to Native American men.
- Of the women who had been pressured to work in the sex industry, over one-quarter (28%) were first approached as children under the age of 18.

10. Experiences of violence and exploitation among Native American women and men



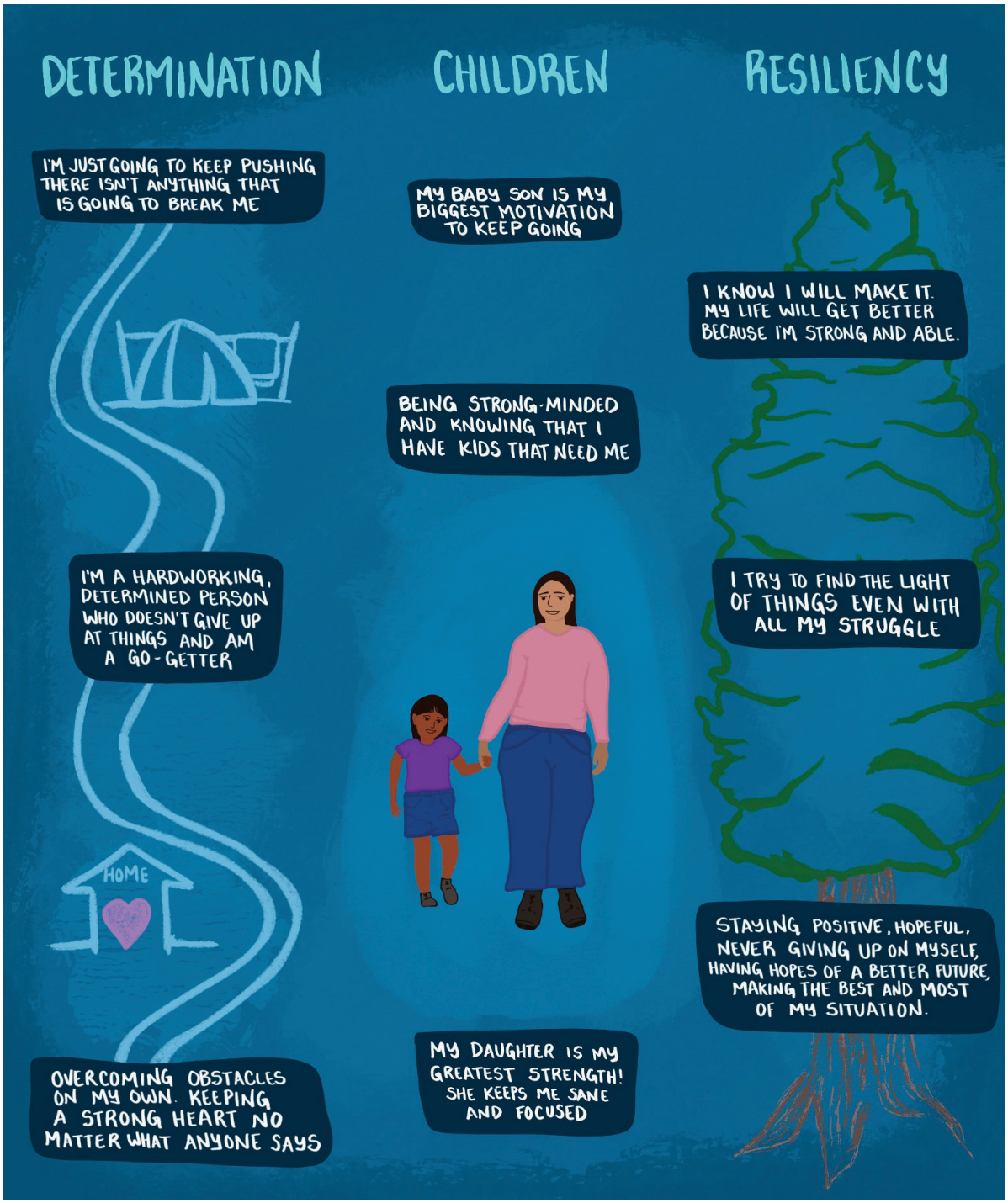
Source. 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study interviews. Does not include 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data (reported separately).

[11] For the purposes of this analysis, "men" and "women" refer to cisgender men and women.

Sources of strength

While the Minnesota Homeless Study asks respondents to share difficult experiences around homelessness and its related factors, it also asks an open-ended question about important sources of strength that help them deal with challenges in their lives. These responses were coded into themes, which are shared below alongside illustrative quotes. Most often, Native Americans experiencing homelessness identified their **determination, love and responsibility for their children**, and **resiliency**. It is critical to recognize these strengths in any solutions to addressing homelessness.

At the same time, it is also critical to acknowledge that **these strengths are repeatedly tested by systems that fail Native American families.**



Moving forward

Healing traumas and strengthening families is paramount to disrupting homelessness and its intertwined factors.

Services and supports for Native American communities must be **culturally responsive**, **trauma-informed**, and take the **whole family** into consideration. Connecting people with their culture can be restorative and healing. Children are a source of strength for their parents while also being vulnerable to falling down a path that has been etched by broken systems. High rates of fentanyl use and drug overdose point to an intense need for **more substance use and treatment programming** that is specifically tailored to Native American communities experiencing homelessness.

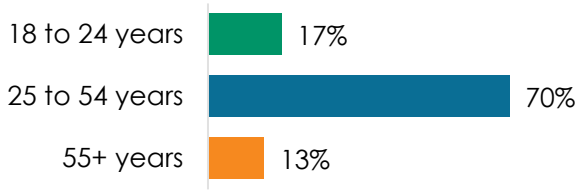
Non-Native community partners must **recognize Tribal self-determination and Native American leadership**. Native American nonprofits and Tribal leaders have done a great deal of work to address homelessness, especially unsheltered homelessness in Minneapolis. For example, Native American leaders responded to one of Minnesota's largest homeless encampments—the Wall of Forgotten Natives—by building an emergency shelter and offering other supports. Continued efforts to expand housing and culturally specific services must learn from and build on previous efforts.

At the same time, a deeply entrenched, complex issue like homelessness is not the burden of one group alone. **Multiple agencies and jurisdictions must work together** to identify solutions, bring more and better services to Native Americans in Minnesota, and break down systemic barriers. For example, in 2014, the Minnesota Tribal Collaborative was formed to "address historical barriers and unique needs" of Tribal members experiencing housing instability and homelessness.

It is our **collective responsibility to confront the current and historic factors** that have created and reinforced **vast disparities in homelessness** among Native American Minnesotans.

Native American adults experiencing homelessness in Minnesota

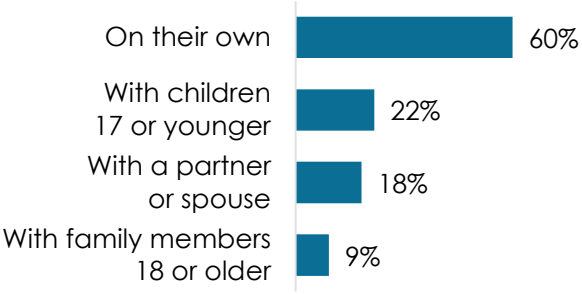
Age



Note. Children under 18 are not included in this analysis.

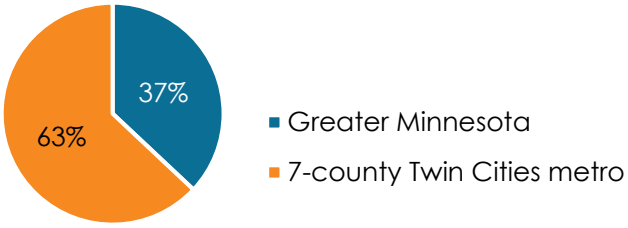
Family structure

Respondents were staying:

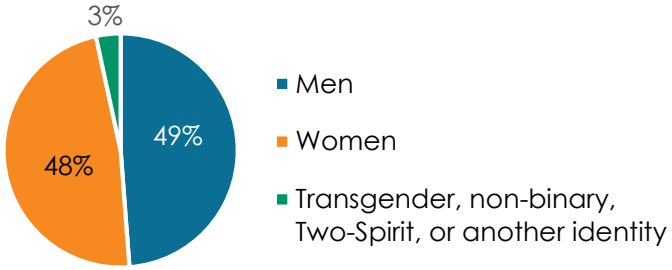


Region

Respondents were staying in:



Gender identity



Note. Does not include 2023 Reservation Homeless Study data (reported separately).

About the studies

Every three years, Wilder Research conducts a one-day statewide study to better understand the prevalence of homelessness in Minnesota and the circumstances of those experiencing homelessness. The most recent study took place on October 26, 2023, and included:

- **Face-to-face interviews** with people throughout the state who meet a federal definition of homelessness.
- **A count** of people experiencing homelessness.

In addition, six tribes in Minnesota partnered with Wilder Research to conduct the 2023 Reservation Homeless Study. This study took place during a similar time as the Minnesota Homeless Study and honors tribal ownership of their data. With permission from participating tribes (Bois Forte, Fond du Lac, Leech Lake, Mille Lacs, Red Lake, and White Earth), Wilder Research combined interview data for race and ethnicity. Beyond the racial and ethnic identity data in Figure 1, **this report does not include Reservation Study data.** Those data are owned by participating tribes. A companion report, *Homelessness on Minnesota Native American Reservations*, was also published in 2025.

A note about sample sizes. Throughout this report, sample sizes, or Ns, vary by question. In general, weighted Ns for the two primary categories in this brief are:

- Native American adults, N=1,175
- Non-Native adults, N=4,744

Visit mnhomeless.org for question-by-question data tables for all persons interviewed.

The study is an independent initiative of Wilder Research in partnership with public and private funders and in-kind support from service providers throughout the state.

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Supported by: Michelle Decker Gerrard, Nicole MartinRogers, Rebecca Sales, Jackie Aman, Walker Bosch, Phil Cooper, Anna Alba, and Maureen McGovern