

Homelessness on Minnesota Native American Reservations

Summary of the 2023 Minnesota Reservation Homeless Study

Background

This summary provides results from the 2023 Reservation Homeless Study, a survey of homelessness on Native American reservations that share geography with Minnesota, including: Bois Forte Band of Chippewa, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe, Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, Red Lake Nation, and White Earth Nation.

To respect the data sovereignty of each participating nation, results specific to each reservation are maintained and kept confidential by the nation to which the data belong. The following summary provides data combined across all participating reservations.



Minnesota Homeless Study
A Project of Wilder Research

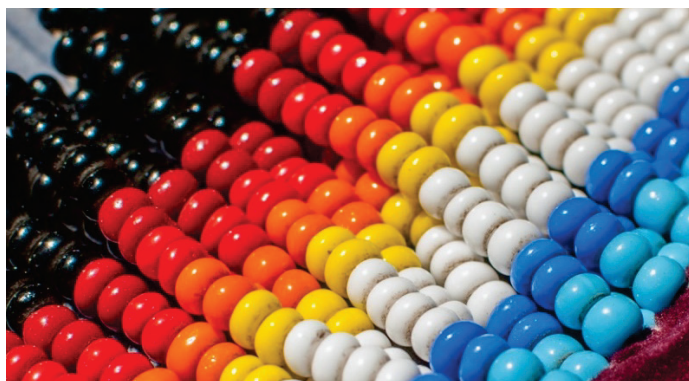


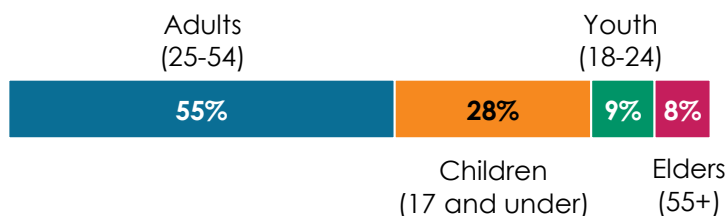
Photo by Barta IV – [Beads-7700](#)

Overall numbers and demographics

A total of **1,046** people were interviewed in October and November 2023 as a part of the study. Adding together the significant others and children that accompanied these respondents plus people staying in shelters on reservations, **1,759 people** were counted as part of the study.

- Most individuals (**1,594**) met the federal definition of *homelessness* – staying in a shelter, outside, in another space not intended for habitation, or doubled up with others in a precarious situation.
- Children, youth, and elders made up 45% of the homeless or near-homeless populations for the 2023 Reservation Homeless Study.

Ages of people included in the 2023 Reservation Study (N=1,759)



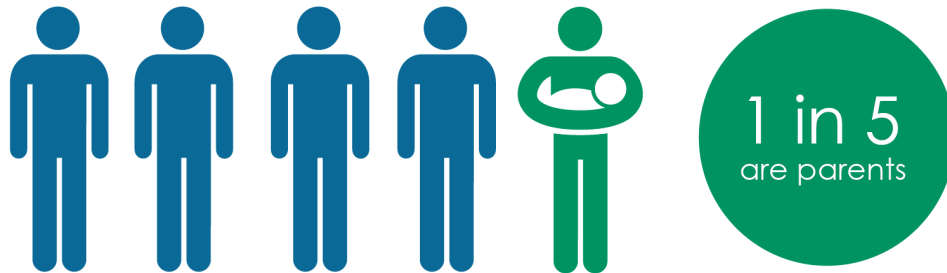
Demographics and experiences of homelessness



Most respondents were Native American (97%) and enrolled tribal members (91%).



One in five (22%) respondents were parents accompanied by their children.
In total, there were 466 children with their parents.



Most respondents (81%) were experiencing long-term homelessness –
without a permanent residence for at least one year, or four or more times during
the last three years.



**Nearly one-third (29%) of reservation respondents first became homeless
as a child.**



Many experiencing homelessness on reservations spend nights unsheltered.



Among respondents who met the federal definition for homelessness, **49% spent at least one of the last 30 nights outside, in a car or vacant building, or in some other place not intended for housing.**

Causes of homelessness and barriers to obtaining housing



Most respondents became homeless (or near-homeless) because of financial or relationship reasons, including: losing their job or having their hours cut (31%), breaking up with a spouse or partner (31%), or problems getting along with others in the household (28%).

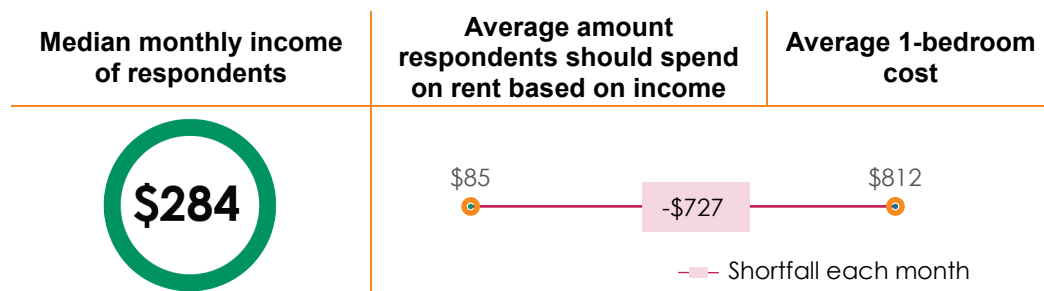


A lack of affordable housing is the most common barrier to obtaining housing (38%) – a consistent primary barrier to housing since the 2012 Reservation Homeless Study.

Housing affordability and access to subsidized housing

The median income of reservation respondents highlights the need for more affordable housing. According to HUD guidelines, households should spend no more than 30% of income on housing, which would be \$85 a month for the average respondent—far below the 2023 fair market rent of \$812 for a one-bedroom apartment in greater Minnesota (Housing Link, 2023).

Significant gap between the cost of housing and what respondents can afford to pay for housing each month

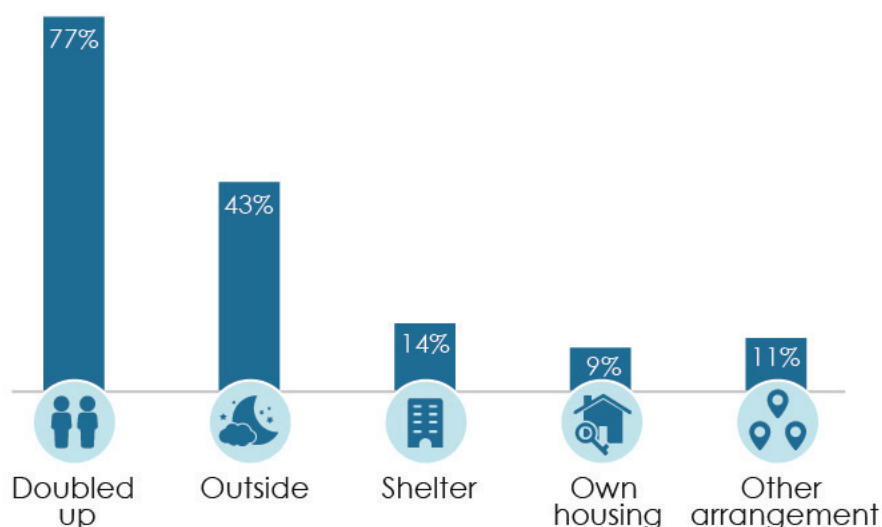


Reservation respondents were less likely to be on a subsidized housing waiting list than people experiencing homelessness in greater Minnesota – 30% versus 51%. While the average wait time for reservation respondents has decreased over time, 20% of respondents had been waiting for over a year.

Where did respondents stay in the past month?

In the 30 days before the 2023 Reservation Homeless Study, **respondents most frequently doubled up (77%), or stayed outside (43%)**. Fewer respondents stayed in a shelter (14%), regular housing of their own (9%), or in some other arrangement (11%).

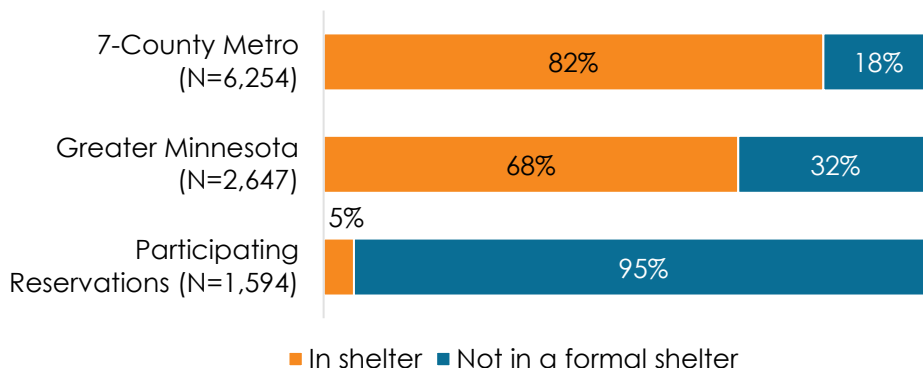
Percentage of respondents spending at least one night in each living situation in the previous 30 days



People experiencing homelessness on reservations rarely stay in formal shelters (and few shelters are available) – especially when compared to people experiencing homelessness in the rest of Minnesota.

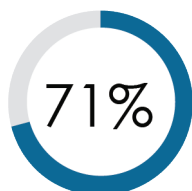
The 2023 Reservation Homeless Study shows that only 5% of reservation respondents were in formal shelters, due to fewer shelter options. In contrast, 82% of individuals experiencing homelessness in the Twin Cities metro and 68% in greater Minnesota were in shelters (as shown through the statewide study).

People living in a formal shelter versus not in a formal shelter, by geography



Doubled-up respondents and overcrowding

Doubling up has historically been the most common form of homelessness on reservations. While doubling up reflects a strong cultural tradition in Native American communities of welcoming friends and family into their homes when they need a place to stay, 98% of respondents would prefer their own housing if they could find or afford it.



At the time of the survey, 71% of respondents were doubled up with others, staying with a family member or someone else they knew.

Many doubled-up respondents face considerable difficulty finding a consistent place to stay for the night. During the month before the survey, 33% of doubled-up respondents had spent at least one night outside or in a location not intended for housing; 16% had done so for more than a week. This is a long-term issue for many – 86% of doubled-up respondents had been without their own place for more than one year; 17% of doubled-up respondents had never had a place of their own.

Doubled-up arrangements are often precarious and unstable, with 81% meeting the federal definition of homelessness because their doubled-up situation was precarious – such as individuals fleeing domestic violence, at imminent risk of being homeless, or having spent at least one day outside in the previous 30 days. Doubled-up situations are often unstable, with 86% of doubled-up respondents having lived in two or more places during the previous year, and 43% in four or more places.

Employment

Consistent with previous years, losing one's job or having their hours cut was the most frequently cited reason for becoming homeless or near-homeless.

The employment rate among 2023 reservation respondents was low (20%) and has continued to fall over time when compared with the employment rate of respondents from previous Reservation Homeless Studies. Most who were unemployed at the time of the survey (72%) had been without a job for a year or more. In terms of educational background, 68% of all respondents had completed high school or obtained a GED.

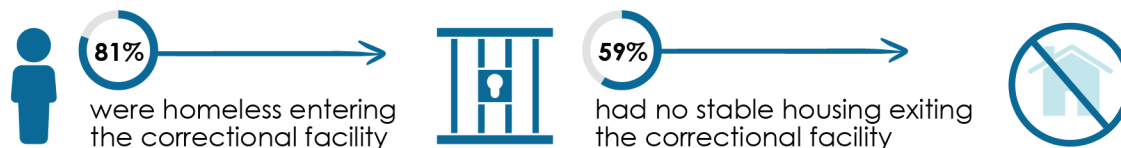
Incarceration

A higher percentage of reservation respondents (67%) had ever spent time in a correctional facility compared to statewide respondents (51%), reflecting the over-representation of Native Americans in Minnesota's criminal justice system – due in large part to income inequality, lack of access to resources, and biased law enforcement and judicial processes.

Criminal history is a barrier to securing housing. Among respondents with a criminal history, 29% reported that their criminal history was a barrier to securing housing.

Parental incarceration may contribute to the cycle of inter-generational homelessness. Among unaccompanied youth respondents (age 24 and younger), 53% had parents who had been incarcerated at some point in their lives.

Reservation respondents with a recent history of incarceration faced many housing barriers following their exit. For respondents who left correctional facilities in the year prior to the study:



Trauma and adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)

Violence and abuse often lead to unstable housing situations. This includes both recent violence and violence experienced or witnessed as a child.

Leaving domestic abuse situations was a direct contributor to homelessness for 19% of female reservation respondents. Limited domestic violence shelter options on reservations leave many unable to seek refuge, often forcing them to stay in abusive situations.

- 33% of respondents (43% of women, 23% of men) had stayed in abusive situations because they did not have other housing options.
- 21% of respondents (29% of women, 12% of men) had been in a physically abusive relationship in the past year.

Many respondents (42%) experience violence or sexual exploitation while homeless.

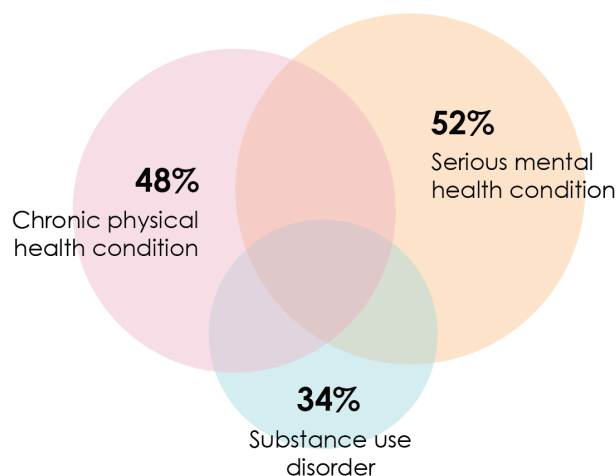
Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are prevalent among reservation respondents. 74% of reservation respondents had experienced at least one ACE, and 45% had experienced three or more.

Physical and mental health

People experiencing homelessness and near-homelessness face substantial risks to health and well-being. Some health conditions can be a result of trauma experienced while homeless and pose a significant barrier to getting stable housing. Health can also have an effect on employment prospects: physical health was cited as a barrier to employment among 18% of respondents who were not employed.

Co-occurrence of health issues is common among people experiencing homelessness or near-homelessness on reservations.

Mental, physical, and substance use conditions among reservation respondents (N=1,046)



Reported conditions:

None

29%

One or more

75%

2 or more

45%

All 3

18%

- One of four respondents had physical or mental health disabilities that impacted their ability to work or carry out daily activities.
- 25% expressed signs of having experienced a traumatic brain injury (TBI).

Substance use

Methamphetamine is the most commonly used illegal drug among reservation respondents, with 23% reporting use in the previous 30 days. Meth use grew by 9 percentage points between 2018 and 2023.

Fentanyl and other opioids are also common, with 20% of respondents reporting opioid use in the past 30 days. This included fentanyl (17%), heroin (8%), or another opiate (5%).

Substance use during the past 30 days, 2012-2023

Substance	2012	2015	2018	2023
Marijuana	23%	31%	41%	55%
Alcohol	35%	30%	32%	30%
Methamphetamine	4%	7%	14%	23%
Any opioid (fentanyl, heroin, or another opioid)	n/a	n/a	11%	20%
Fentanyl	n/a	n/a	n/a	17%
Heroin	2%	6%	6%	8%

Note. Due to changes in the question wording around substance use, the percentage of respondents who used "any opioid" or "fentanyl" are not available for several past studies.

Access to health care, public benefits, and support services

65% of reservation respondents regularly used Indian Health Services and were more likely to have a regular place to go for medical care when compared with statewide respondents.

Reservation respondents generally reported relatively low utilization of benefits and services, most often utilizing food stamps (63%) and food shelves (37%) during the month prior to the study. In addition, 39% of reservation respondents received cash benefits, with many potentially eligible but not receiving assistance.

People experiencing homelessness in greater Minnesota were more likely to access help with coordinated entry or finding housing than reservation respondents (50% in greater Minnesota vs. 13% on reservations) and to access help from drop-in centers (31% in greater Minnesota vs. 9% on reservations).

Youth on their own

Youth – unaccompanied minors and young adults – made up 12% of the homeless population on reservations. Most lived in doubled-up situations (78%), but were actively seeking housing and would prefer to live independently if they had the resources. One in four (23%) were parents, though many did not have their children with them at the time of the study (47% of parents).

Youth listed a variety of reasons as leading to their current housing instability, but most commonly cited frequent conflict with parents (55%), parents' substance abuse (41%), and neglect (38%). These challenges push youth to seek out alternative living situations, sometimes in unstable and unsafe environments.

Youth experiencing homelessness often come from backgrounds of trauma, having lived in foster care, treatment facilities, or juvenile detention. Many have experienced mental health challenges, abuse, and neglect. These early-life experiences, combined with a higher likelihood of having parents with mental health or criminal histories when compared to older reservation respondents, contribute to the complex struggles these youth face in their efforts to build a stable life.

Our partners

We are honored to partner with the following Native nations – in addition to the Minnesota Tribal Collaborative – on the 2023 Reservation Homeless Study. To respect the data sovereignty of each participating nation, results specific to each reservation are maintained and kept confidential by the nation to which the data belong. All nations that share geography with Minnesota are invited to participate in the Reservation Homeless Study.



Bois Forte Band of Chippewa
Zagaakwaandagowiniwag



Red Lake Nation
Miskwaagamiiwi-Zaagaiganing



Fond du Lac Band of Lake
Superior Chippewa
Nah-gah-chi-wa-nong



Upper Sioux Community
Pezihutazizi



Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe
Gaa-zagaskwaajimekaag



White Earth Nation
Gaa-waabaabiganikaag



Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe
Misi-zaaga'iganiing

Methods and definitions

The 2023 Reservation Homeless Study includes people living on participating Minnesota Native American reservations who are experiencing literal *homelessness* and those experiencing *near-homelessness*. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD):

Homelessness includes:

- People staying in a shelter, transitional housing, or a place not intended for housing, or those facing eviction with no other place to go
- Some who are temporarily staying with others (doubled up) if their situation is precarious
- People fleeing violence

Near-homelessness includes:

- People who are staying with others (doubled up) in relatively more stable conditions

The Reservation Homeless Study is conducted every three years in conjunction with the Minnesota Homeless Study, a statewide study of homelessness that Wilder Research has directed every three years since 1991. For all publicly available statewide results from the 2023 Minnesota Homeless Study, visit mnhomeless.org

Describing Native nations:

Please note that the Minnesota Tribal Collaborative uses the term “Native American” when referring to the individuals, families, and communities that make up their nations. The term “American Indian” is used in this report when referring to the U.S. Census category or state-funded programs.

This summary presents highlights of
HOMELESSNESS ON MINNESOTA NATIVE
AMERICAN RESERVATIONS: FINDINGS
FROM THE 2023 MINNESOTA
RESERVATION STUDY.

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