

MIXED TRENDS FOR WISCONSIN'S HOMELESS POPULATION

Despite recent increases in the state's homeless population, Wisconsin has reported lower rates of homelessness than both its regional peers and the nation for the last decade. As homelessness continues to rise and federal policy and funding priorities shift, state leaders should consider how to replicate the successes of the past decade while positioning Wisconsin to stay ahead of troubling national trends.

The reported number of homeless individuals in Wisconsin increased 4.8% in 2026 to 5,495, according to data collected each January by organizations combatting homelessness across the state. This continued a trend of slow growth in Wisconsin's homeless population since 2021 following years of decline, as our [previous research showed](#).

Over the longer-term, however, Wisconsin has outperformed the nation in addressing homelessness. Between 2015 and 2025 (the most recent year for which national data are available), the total number of people experiencing homelessness nationwide increased by 32.0%. In contrast, Wisconsin's homeless population in 2025 was 13.4% lower than the 6,057 individuals reported in 2015.

In this brief, we examine homelessness trends in Wisconsin and its urban and rural areas and compare Wisconsin with other Midwestern states and the nation. Our analysis comes at a time when Wisconsin leaders work to respond to increasing needs while also facing significant [uncertainty surrounding federal policy and funding](#) they rely upon. Proposed changes in federal housing priorities have left [many groups unsure](#) of what support they may receive in the next funding cycle.

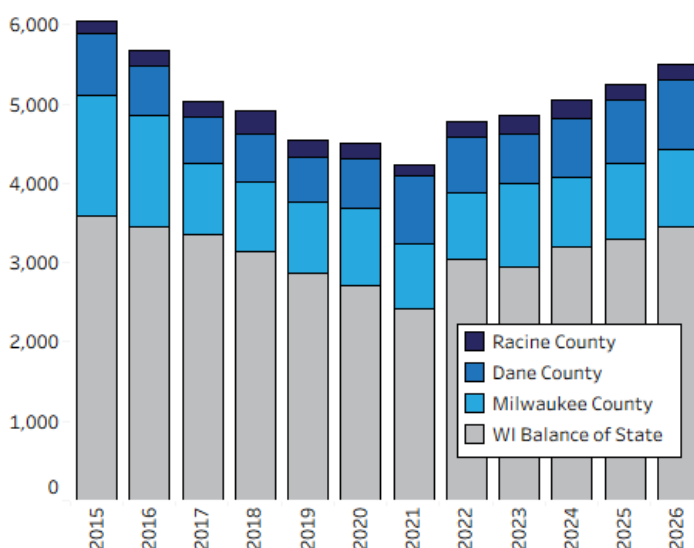
GAUGING HOMELESSNESS IN WISCONSIN

Figure 1 shows how Wisconsin's homeless population has changed over the past decade, broken down by the areas served by each of the state's four continuum of care (CoC) organizations. The CoCs are planning bodies, recognized by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), that coordinate housing and service funding for the agencies that work with homeless individuals and families in their areas. Three of Wisconsin's four CoC organizations serve the counties of Milwaukee, Dane, and Racine, while the fourth (Balance of State) serves the state's remaining 69 counties.

In January 2026, Milwaukee had the largest population of homeless individuals among the three Wisconsin CoCs that serve individual counties, at 978. However, it has also experienced the largest long-term decrease among them, with 30.9% fewer homeless individuals reported in 2026 than in 2016.

In contrast, Dane County's homeless population fluctuated over the decade but trended upward, with 880 individuals reported in 2026, a 39.9% increase

Figure 1: State's Homeless Population Continues to Rise
Annual January counts of homeless individuals in Wisconsin, by region



Source: The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Wisconsin CoCs

from 2016. Racine County reported 192 unhoused individuals in 2026 – nearly the same as in 2016.

Dane County had the highest rate of homelessness relative to the size of its overall population in 2025 (the most recent year for which population estimates are available to allow for these rates to be calculated), with 13.4 individuals experiencing homelessness per 10,000 residents. The rates of Milwaukee and Racine counties were lower, at 10.5 and 9.7, respectively.

Although the Wisconsin Balance of State CoC reported the largest homeless population in January 2026, at 3,445, it oversees the largest area and population and had the lowest rate of homelessness among the four CoCs as of 2025, at 7.7 persons per 10,000 residents. This CoC is classified by HUD as rural – and much of it is rural – but it also contains cities and suburban areas including Green Bay and Waukesha.

When combined, Wisconsin’s four CoCs reported fewer homeless individuals in 2026 than in 2015. Much of this decrease occurred in the 2010s and coincided with the proliferation of the Housing First model among those who work with the homeless population. This model acknowledges that individuals experiencing homelessness often have other issues such as substance use, mental illness, or unemployment that affect their housing status. This approach offers long-term housing as quickly as possible with the intention of providing stability that can allow people to address their other needs. A contrasting philosophy would provide temporary forms of housing assistance that may be contingent on first meeting those other needs.

Following the progress made during the 2010s, the homeless population in Wisconsin has risen steadily since 2021, underscoring the need for strategies to reverse this recent trend. Among the factors likely contributing to the increase are household incomes [not keeping pace](#) with rising housing costs and the end of supports that were available during the COVID pandemic, including a federal eviction moratorium, expanded emergency rent assistance, and expanded income supports.

The remainder of this brief compares homelessness figures from Wisconsin with national and regional trends by analyzing annual point-in-time reports and housing inventory counts from CoCs across the nation, as published by HUD. The Wisconsin CoCs provided

their January 2026 counts directly for this report, but the most recent data available from CoCs outside Wisconsin are from January 2025, so we use the 2025 data for national comparisons.

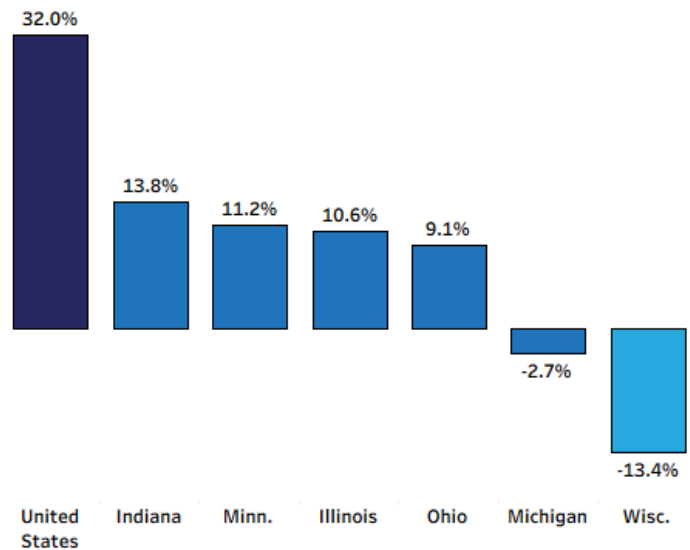
WISCONSIN FARES BEST IN MIDWEST

Among the six Midwest states in our HUD-designated region, Wisconsin has reported the smallest homeless population every year since 2016, when its count dropped below Indiana’s. Across the region, most states experienced declines or little change in their homeless populations in the 2010s but have seen increases since 2020, pushing their 2025 totals to the highest levels in at least a decade.

The six-state Midwest region has seen slower growth in homelessness than the nation as a whole since 2015. As Figure 2 shows, the growth rate in every Midwest state was below the national rate of 32.0%. Wisconsin experienced the largest actual decline (814 persons) and the largest proportional decline (13.4%) in homelessness during this period.

Wisconsin’s smaller homeless population is not solely attributed to its relatively small general population (Minnesota is the only state in the region with a smaller general population). Wisconsin has the lowest rate of homelessness among its regional peers, with 8.8 unhoused persons for every 10,000 state residents.

Fig 2: Wisconsin Leads Midwest in Homelessness Decline
Percent change in homeless persons, 2015-2025, by state



Source: The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development



While we cannot fully explain why Wisconsin has had greater success in preventing homelessness than its peer states, homelessness experts we interviewed for this research pointed to potential factors. Those include strong coordination among CoC leaders, including monthly meetings and a shared management information system that offers service providers access to information about people they serve even if they move from one area of the state to another.

All six states across the Midwest region have homelessness rates below the national rate of 21.6 per 10,000. Minnesota has had the highest rate in the region for the past decade; its rate was 14.4 in 2025. Illinois had the second-highest rate in 2025 with 11.5, which followed a spike in 2024, largely driven by asylum seekers. Prior to 2024, the rate for Illinois was in line with those of the other states in the region, which all stayed below 11.0 per 10,000 state residents.

The increase of almost 3,000 homeless individuals in the Midwest region (5.5%) was primarily due to a rise in unsheltered persons. To be classified as unsheltered, one must be living in a place not meant for human habitation, such as a vehicle, tent, or abandoned building. Since 2015, the unsheltered count in the Midwest increased by 3,348 persons (49.6%), while those in temporary shelter programs (i.e., emergency shelters or transitional housing) decreased by 373 (0.8%).

The incremental change in the six-state Midwest region's total count of sheltered homeless individuals masks a significant shift in the size of different types of programs addressing homelessness. Since 2015, the number of individuals in emergency shelters increased by 11,931, while those in transitional housing decreased by 12,240. Emergency shelters typically provide nightly beds, whereas transitional housing provides a place to stay for up to 24 months. The availability of permanent housing programs grew during this period, but participation in those programs is not reported on the point-in-time reports because those individuals and families are no longer considered homeless.

Wisconsin's homeless population has followed a similar pattern. The number of individuals in emergency shelters increased by 842 between 2015 and 2025, while those in transitional housing decreased by 1,674 and those who were unsheltered increased by 34.

These shifts have been greatly influenced by changes in policy and program availability. Over the past decade, there has been a national transition from programs offering temporary housing solutions to those offering longer-term or permanent housing support. Although both program types may offer a range of supports, the close association between supports and longer-term programs may have contributed to their greater effectiveness.

Among temporary programs, transitional housing has seen the largest decline, decreasing by 13,515 beds across the Midwest since 2015. Meanwhile, emergency shelter programs, which address extremely short-term or nightly housing situations, expanded by 13,516 beds, resulting in virtually no net change in available beds in temporary shelter programs. Conversely, programs that provide longer-term or permanent housing expanded by 23,819 beds.

URBAN AREAS

Following statewide trends, Milwaukee County has reported more favorable homelessness statistics than comparable urban CoCs in the Midwest, which include Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, Detroit, Indianapolis, and Minneapolis. From 2015 to 2025, these seven urban communities had a net aggregate decrease of 867 homeless individuals (6.3%). Milwaukee had the largest proportional decrease (36.4%) and the second-largest actual decrease (553 persons). Columbus and Indianapolis were the only cities in this group to see their homeless populations grow during this period.

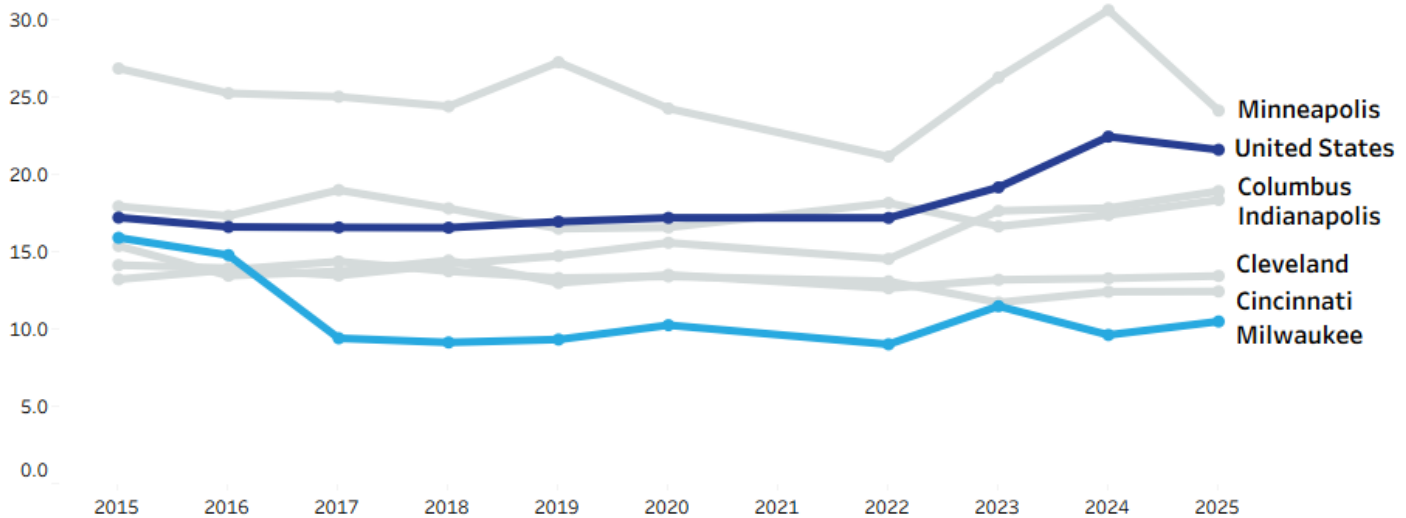
Milwaukee, with a 2025 homelessness rate of 10.5 persons per 10,000 residents, has had the lowest rate among these cities since 2017 (see Figure 3 on the next page). Milwaukee's 2025 rate was less than half the national rate of 21.6 unhoused persons per 10,000 residents. At 24.0, Minneapolis was the only city in this group whose rate was above the national rate. (The Detroit CoC is excluded from this comparison because it contains only part of Wayne County, whereas each of the other selected urban CoCs serve entire counties.)

The Milwaukee leaders we consulted suggested that several factors have contributed to these better outcomes. For example, they said many leaders of Milwaukee's homeless-serving organizations have many years of experience and are exceptionally collaborative with one another. This includes those leading efforts



Figure 3: Milwaukee's Rate Remains Below Those of Peers

Number of homeless individuals per 10,000 residents, by region



Source: U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
Note: The 2021 data were excluded due to reporting changes regarding COVID-19.

within county government to combat homelessness, who had previous direct experience with homeless-serving community organizations. They also noted that Milwaukee County's "coordinated entry" system is strong, with Impact 2-1-1 typically serving as the first point of contact for people entering the local homelessness support system.

RURAL AREAS

Wisconsin's smaller towns and rural areas are also outperforming those of neighboring states in preventing homelessness. As in Wisconsin, three other Midwest states – Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio – have Balance of State CoCs that primarily serve rural counties but also some small cities and suburbs. Collectively across these four rural CoCs, the homeless population has increased by 1,526 individuals (11.9%) since 2015. Wisconsin's Balance of State CoC was the only one to see a decrease; it had 305 fewer homeless individuals in 2025 than in 2015 (8.5%).

CONCLUSION

Homelessness in Wisconsin decreased throughout the 2010s. Among many factors, this improvement may be attributed at least in part to policy changes at the national and local levels that emphasized the Housing First model.

Since 2021, however, Wisconsin's homeless population has been increasing, though at a slower rate than in its

neighboring states and the nation. This may be influenced by factors such as housing costs rising faster than incomes, worsening economic conditions, and the expiration of pandemic-era supports, rather than by public policies directly pertaining to homelessness, which have not changed considerably during that period.

However, consequential changes may occur soon due to a [shift in priorities and funding at the federal level](#). In the middle of the most recent budget cycle, funding for some programs that address homelessness was pulled and [then reinstated](#), causing disruptions for providers and participants. This experience, and the ongoing pursuit of these proposed policy changes – which are currently under [litigation](#) – has increased concerns among local agencies regarding the types of programs they can offer in light of uncertain federal funding streams.

As homelessness begins to rise again in Wisconsin, policymakers and program leaders may wish to consider which responses could be most effective. This could include expanding the housing programs and funding streams that previously contributed to declines in homelessness while also strengthening prevention efforts that address the factors leading to housing instability. Keeping people housed before they experience homelessness is often less costly and disruptive than helping them recover after they have lost their homes.

