



County of Los Angeles  
**Homeless Initiative**  
REAL HELP,  
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# Los Angeles County Women's Needs Assessment

2022 Survey of Women Experiencing Homelessness



# Los Angeles County Women’s Needs Assessment

## Findings from the 2022 Survey of Women Experiencing Homelessness

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*July 2023*

### **Executive Summary**

On any given night in 2022, there were more than 14,000 women experiencing homelessness as individuals—meaning they were seeking services without partners or children—in the Los Angeles City and County Continuum of Care. Nearly 600 women experiencing homelessness participated in the Los Angeles County Women’s Needs Assessment survey in the fall of 2022. This report documents the findings from this survey, including women’s characteristics, their experiences of homelessness and within the homelessness response system, and their access to and interactions with other mainstream systems. It also identifies the barriers and challenges women face in accessing housing, the services they need, what women want in housing, and interim responses while waiting for housing. Based on these findings, we make policy and programmatic recommendations for local practitioners and policymakers as well as state and federal policymakers.

### *Background*

Women experiencing homelessness as individuals—those who are not accompanied by or seeking services with a partner, children, or other dependents—are a growing population in Los Angeles and nationally. In Los Angeles, these women make up 68 percent of all women experiencing homelessness and 20 percent of all individuals experiencing homelessness. Prior research has highlighted the challenges and negative outcomes that women experiencing homelessness face. In recognition of the growing population of women experiencing homelessness and their needs, the City and County of Los Angeles passed resolutions naming women a unique subpopulation of people experiencing homelessness, and the County Homelessness Initiative, in partnership with the Downtown Women’s Center (DWC), engaged the Urban Institute and the Hub for Urban Initiatives to conduct the first countywide women’s needs assessment. DWC had conducted seven prior needs assessments that focused on women in Skid Row and, in 2019, women in the City of Los Angeles. (See box ES.1 for additional details on the research design and implementation of the Los Angeles Women’s Needs Assessment.)

From October to December 2022, nearly 600 women experiencing homelessness across every Service Planning Area (SPA) in Los Angeles completed a 30–45 minute, 78-question survey, which sought to answer the following primary research questions:

- What are the characteristics of unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County?
- What are the experiences of unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County with homeless services?
- What are the experiences of unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County with other service systems?
- What do unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County want in housing?
- In the absence of housing, what do unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles County want in shelters and other emergency assistance?

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#### BOX ES.1

### **Understanding the Design and Implementation of the 2022 Los Angeles County Women’s Needs Assessment**

The Los Angeles County Women’s Needs Assessment was designed as a sequential exploratory mixed-methods, community-engaged research project. In spring 2022, DWC convened Steering and Advisory Committees to help guide the project from March 2022 to June 2023. The committee members comprised policymakers and service providers, as well as women with lived experiences of homelessness. Research team members and DWC and LA County Homeless Initiative staff regularly convened with these committees to solicit input and feedback on research design decisions. Throughout the spring of 2022, the research team also held listening sessions with nearly 100 women experiencing homelessness in all eight Service Planning Areas (SPAs) in Los Angeles. These listening sessions, along with input from the Steering and Advisory Committees, guided the research team’s revisions to the survey instrument used in prior women’s needs assessments.

In fall 2022, volunteers administered the redesigned, 78-question survey instrument in all eight SPAs between October 24 and December 9, 2022. Surveys were administered in English and Spanish at recruited service provider sites. In spring 2023, both during and after analysis of the survey data, the research team conducted data walks with the Steering and Advisory Committees and several other stakeholder groups to help interpret and contextualize findings from the survey analysis. In particular, these data walks provided input into our policy and practice recommendations.

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## *Women's Experiences of Homelessness*

Most women experienced multiple episodes of homelessness, with more than half of women (57.3 percent) reporting at least one prior episode of homelessness before their current episode at the time of the survey. More than 80 percent of women have experienced lifetime lengths of homelessness over a year, with more than half of those individuals experiencing lifetime homelessness for longer than five years.

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*I've been homeless at least four times in the last eight years. This time was the longest I've been homeless over the year.*

*—Los Angeles County Women's Needs Assessment listening session participant*

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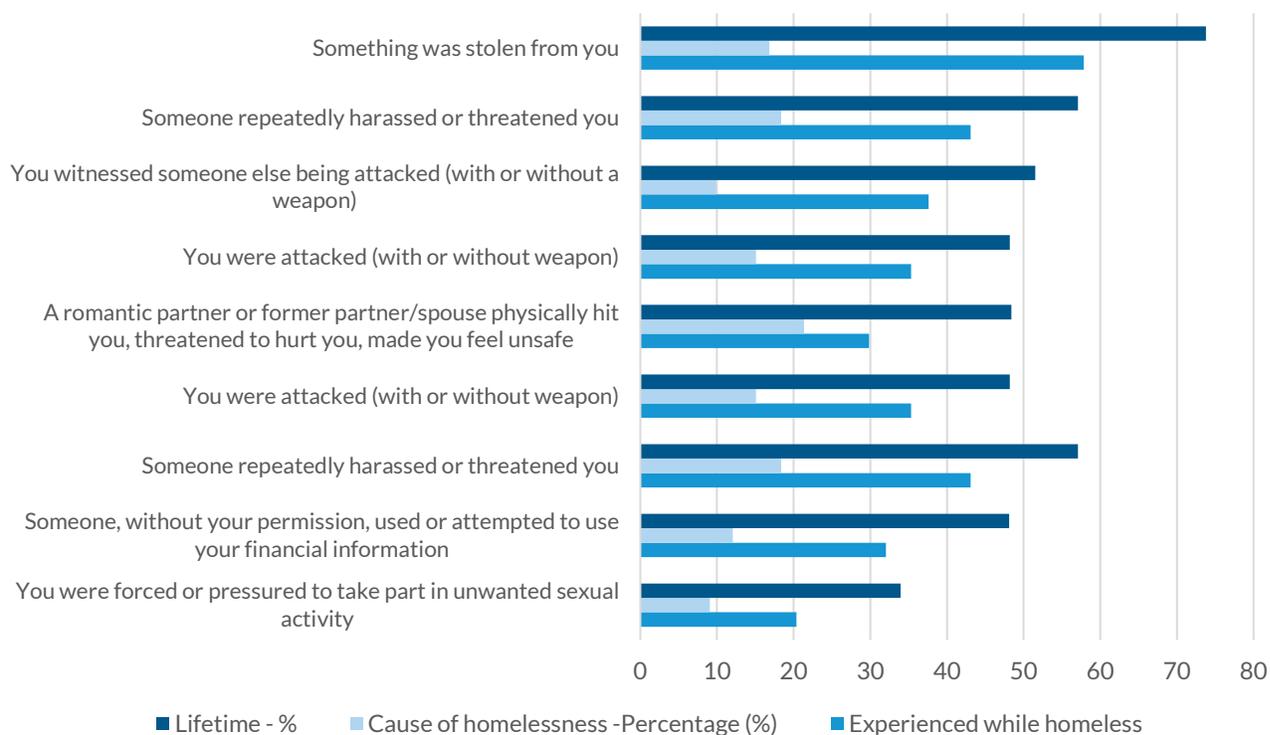
Nearly 70 percent of women most often slept in unsheltered locations, including on the streets (40.2 percent); in cars, vans, or RVs (23.2 percent); on beaches or riverbeds (3.5 percent); and on public transportation (2.1 percent). Among women who most often slept in sheltered locations, they reported sleeping in short-term, temporary, or transitional housing (20.8 percent) or in hotels or motels (2.1 percent). About 7 percent of women reported most often sleeping in a different type of situation, with couch surfing cited as the most common example (6.3 percent).

More than 90 percent of women experienced some form of victimization in their lifetime, including having something stolen (73.8 percent), being repeatedly harassed or threatened (57.1 percent), and being threatened, physically hit, or made to feel unsafe by a romantic partner (48.4 percent). For women with lifetime experiences of victimization, experiencing threats or violence from a romantic partner was the type of victimization most likely to cause their experience of homelessness (21.4 percent of all women and 44.2 percent of women who reported lifetime experiences). While experiencing homelessness, 57.9 percent of women had something stolen from them; 43.1 percent were repeatedly harassed or threatened; 37.6 and 35.3 percent witnessed an attack or were attacked themselves, respectively; and 20.4 percent were forced to take part in unwanted sexual activity (figure ES.1).

FIGURE ES.1

### Victimization Histories of Women Experiencing Homelessness

Findings from the 2022 Los Angeles County Women’s Needs Assessment



Source: Los Angeles County Women’s Needs Assessment weighted survey data.

Notes: Unweighted N = 563

### Women’s Barriers to Housing and Services

Women reported significant barriers to exiting homelessness and securing housing. The most frequently reported barriers to permanent housing were lack of housing that women could afford (63.1 percent) and long waiting lists to access vouchers or public housing (55.9 percent).

Without being able to access housing and exit homelessness, women need the crisis response system, including access to shelter and other services, to keep them safe. Unfortunately, women reported significant barriers to accessing or using shelters as well. The most frequently reported barrier was feeling unsafe, with more than half of women citing this concern. Other commonly cited barriers included lack of available spots in shelters (45.8 percent), concerns about privacy (45.4 percent), and lack of shelter options that meet the needs and preferences of respondents (42.8 percent). Only 5.4 percent of women reported they had no barriers in accessing or using shelters.

Of note, Black and African American women were more likely to be concerned about the way they would be treated by shelter staff compared with non-Hispanic white women, Hispanic and Latina women, and women of two or more races. And cisgender women were significantly more likely to report having no barriers to using shelters than were transgender and nonbinary individuals.

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## BOX ES.2

### Understanding the Diverse Characteristics of Women Experiencing Homelessness

- Women experiencing homelessness as individuals ranged in age from 18 to 83 years old. Most women were middle age or older (59 percent were between ages 40 and 64), but 13 percent were between ages 18 to 24. On average, women were about 32 years old when they first experienced homelessness.
- Thirty-four percent of women identified as Hispanic or Latina, 31.6 percent identified as Black or African American, and 21.7 percent identified as white. Black women are particularly overrepresented among women experiencing homelessness (more than 3.5 times their share of the general population).
- Nearly 95 percent of individuals identified specifically as women, and 3.7 percent identified as a gender other than exclusively a woman or man, such as nonbinary or gender fluid; 7.7 percent identified as transgender. About three-quarters of women described their sexual orientation as straight, with nearly 20 percent identifying as bisexual, lesbian, gay, queer, or another sexual orientation.
- All women were seeking services unattached to a partner or spouse, but 51.4 percent of women experienced a separation from a partner or spouse in their lifetime. While all survey participants were currently unaccompanied, meaning they were seeking services or housing by themselves, nearly 55 percent of women experiencing homelessness had children and 1.4 percent were pregnant.
- Sixty-seven percent of the women had an educational attainment at the high school level or beyond. Nearly 30 percent of women experiencing homelessness were working for pay, trading goods or services with others, or both. Among those not currently working, two-thirds identified as having a disability.
- In total, 61 percent of women had a disability, and most women reported their health as fair or poor, with dental health being rated the poorest. Additionally, more than half (51.3 percent) of women experiencing homelessness felt that they did not have a social support network.

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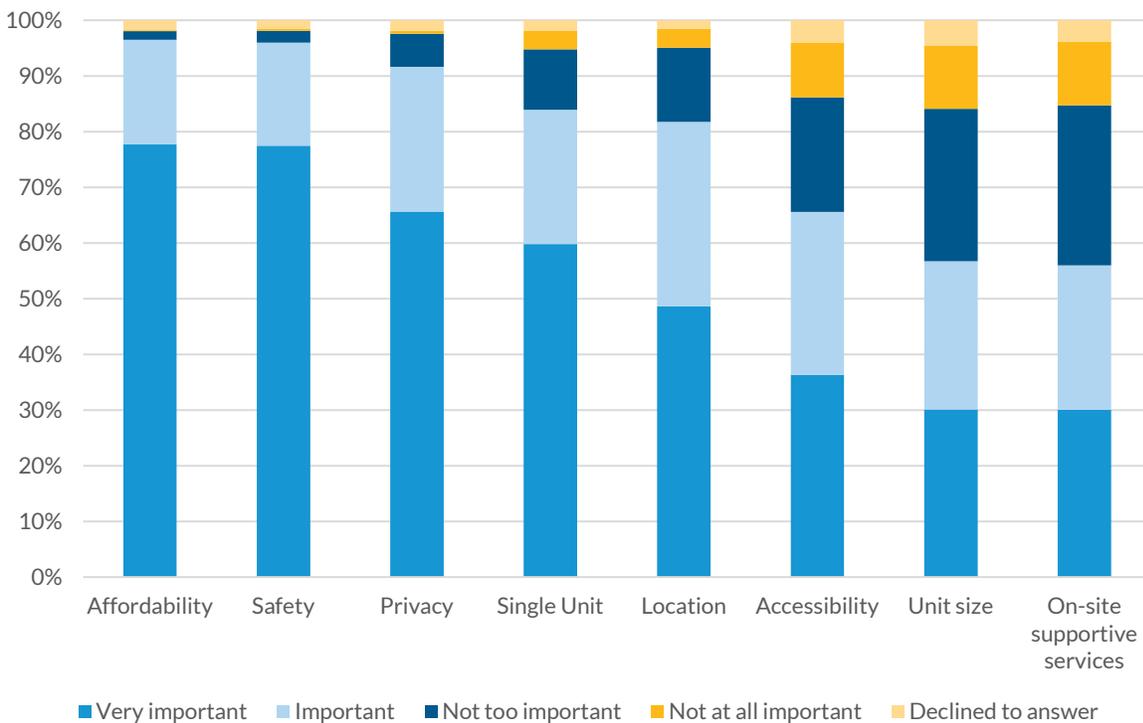
### *What Women Want in Housing*

When asked what they wanted in housing, women were very clear that their highest priorities were affordability, safety, and privacy (figure ES.2). While not prioritized as highly as the top three, women also expressed a desire for a single rather than shared housing unit and emphasized the importance of location. In listening sessions, this emphasis on location included a desire for safety in their new neighborhood as well as access to transportation, family, work, and doctors for health appointments.

FIGURE ES.2

**Findings on Women’s Housing Preferences**

2022 Los Angeles County Women’s Needs Assessment Survey



Source: Weighted survey data.

Notes: Unweighted N = 570.

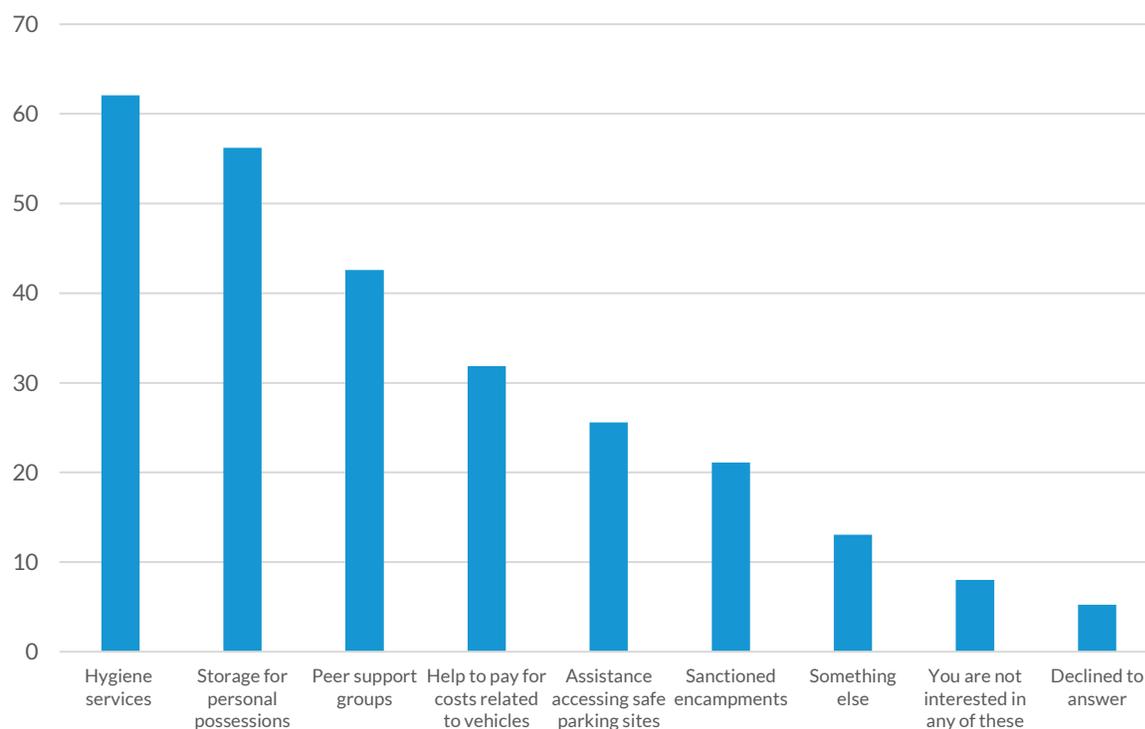
*What Women Want in the Crisis Response System*

In the absence of permanent housing, people experiencing homelessness need safe shelter. When asked about their preferences regarding gender-restricted shelters and housing services, more than 40 percent of women had a preference for women-only shelters and housing services. The survey also asked what other services women would be interested in while they waited for transitional or temporary housing (such as emergency shelters, bridge housing, or interim housing). Women were most interested in hygiene services, such as showers and laundry (62.1 percent), and access to storage for their possessions (56.2 percent) (figure ES.3). These findings are consistent with other challenges women identified, with 74.7 percent of women citing difficulties maintaining their possessions and 70 percent of women reporting that it was difficult to find a bathroom when they were experiencing homelessness. In both instances, it was significantly more difficult for women in unsheltered situations to navigate these hurdles.

FIGURE ES.3

### Findings on Women’s Crisis Response Preferences

2022 Los Angeles County Women’s Needs Assessment Survey



Source: Weighted survey data.

Notes: Unweighted N = 570.

### Recommendations and Conclusion

Survey findings, listening sessions, and data walks with community stakeholders revealed key areas for policy and programmatic work to improve outcomes for women experiencing homelessness.

- **Support efforts to collect data on and tailor services to women experiencing homelessness as individuals.** With three-quarters of women experiencing homelessness in Los Angeles living in unsheltered locations, and with homelessness among women increasing nationally, collecting data on women’s experiences, needs, and preferences will be critical to designing and implementing strategies to effectively end homelessness.
- **Fund housing assistance at a level needed to house all women experiencing homelessness.** Women identified a lack of affordable housing and long waiting lists for housing assistance as their primary barriers to permanent housing. Additionally, women in listening sessions described not being prioritized for housing in coordinated entry. A universal voucher approach would provide a path forward to ending homelessness for all women.
- **Prioritize safety throughout the homelessness response system.** Women indicated that the most common barrier to shelter was concern about their safety and reported unacceptably high rates of

victimization while experiencing homelessness. Prioritizing women's physical and emotional safety will require developing and implementing programs and policies that recognize the unique needs and preferences of women.

- **Provide dignity in the absence of housing. Seventy percent of women reported it was difficult to find a bathroom, and 60 percent reported difficulty finding a shower when they needed one.** In the absence of housing, ensuring that women have dignified access to bathrooms, showers, and storage of possessions is particularly important. Dignity in services also requires removing barriers that prevent access to services and shelter, such as systemic racism and discrimination.
- **Encourage programmatic response accountability when it comes to ensuring equitable outcomes for historically marginalized groups, particularly Black, Hispanic/Latina, Indigenous, and other women of color, as well as LGBTQ+ individuals.** Black and African American women were more likely to be concerned about the way they would be treated by shelter staff than were women of other races and ethnicities, and nonbinary and transgender individuals were more likely to report barriers to shelter than were cisgender women. In addition to tracking outcomes and understanding the experiences of historically marginalized groups in programs, service providers and programs should consider that women's needs may vary based on a variety of characteristics, their individual histories, and where they may be in their life cycle.

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### BOX ES.3

#### Thank You from the Authors

The authors would like to thank all the women who participated in this project, specifically the women experiencing homelessness who participated in listening sessions in the spring of 2022 and the nearly 600 women who completed surveys in the fall of 2022. The authors would also like to give heartfelt thanks to the members of the Steering Committee, including women with lived experiences of homelessness and those who operate programs that help women daily, who guided this work throughout the duration of the project. We would also like to thank the members of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) Lived Experience Advisory Board, Los Angeles County Black People Experiencing Homelessness (BPEH) Implementation Steering Committee, Homelessness Policy Research Institute (HPRI) based out of the Sol Price Social Innovation Center at the University of Southern California, and the Domestic Violence Homeless Services Coalition (DVHSC) for their feedback on report findings.

Finally, the authors would like to thank all the organizations that hosted survey data collection and volunteers who helped administer surveys. This project would have been impossible without their contributions of time and energy.

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## About the Authors

**Samantha Batko** is a principal research associate in the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute, where her research focuses on homelessness, housing instability, housing assistance, and supportive services. She serves as the Co-Principal Investigator of the Los Angeles County Women's Needs Assessment. She has expertise in several US Department of Housing and Urban Development homelessness programs, including homelessness prevention, emergency shelter, rapid rehousing, and permanent supportive housing. She is currently the principle investigator of an evaluation of Tipping Point Community's Chronic Homelessness Initiative in San Francisco, development of the Emergency Rental Assistance Priority Index and targeting tool, and the US Department Housing and Urban Development's Pay for Success permanent supportive housing demonstration evaluation.

**Sofia Herrera** is the director of research, planning, and policy at the Hub for Urban Initiatives, a nonprofit consulting entity in Pasadena, California. She serves as the Co-Principal Investigator of the Los Angeles County Women's Needs Assessment. She holds a courtesy faculty appointment as a research associate professor at the Fuller Graduate School of Psychology in Pasadena, California. In 2018, she completed a needs assessment of women experiencing homelessness for a program working exclusively with unaccompanied women in Service Planning Area (SPA) 3 of Los Angeles County. Dr. Herrera is a co-founder of One in Four, a group formed by academics and nonprofit service organizations working on expanding the evidence to address the needs of unaccompanied women experiencing homelessness in the United States. Since 2016, Dr. Herrera has chaired the Greater Los Angeles Homeless Count Advisory Board at the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority. She is also a research committee member and past grantee of the Homelessness Policy Research Institute at the Sol Price Social Innovation Center of the University of Southern California.

**Lynden Bond** is a research associate at the Metropolitan Housing and Communities Policy Center at the Urban Institute. Lynden is a licensed social worker whose direct practice and research has focused on housing, housing insecurity, and homelessness. Her recent projects include the Los Angeles County Women's Needs Assessment, an evaluation of Tipping Point's Chronic Homelessness Initiative Community Advisory Board, and Urban's Housing Justice project. She is passionate about and committed to using community-empowered methods and partnering with people with lived expertise in research. Bond holds a PhD in social work from New York University.

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