

The Seattle Times

Where are the homeless coming from? They're mostly from here, service providers say

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Some people experiencing homelessness in King County are from elsewhere. But most aren't, according to ZIP code data collected by homeless-services providers.

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There's a question Mark Putnam says he hears every day: Where are all these homeless people in Seattle and King County coming from?

"That's what people ask me all the time — reporters, elected officials, residents, when I speak at churches," said Putnam, executive director of All Home, which coordinates homeless services among King County cities, nonprofits and religious institutions.

"Homelessness is growing. There's a feeling people must be moving here."

Data collected by homeless-services providers tell a different story, however. When homeless people in King County, including Seattle, access a publicly funded service such as an emergency shelter, housing program or outreach program, providers are supposed to ask them a set of questions, including their last ZIP code of residence.

Where Seattle and King County homeless came from in 2014

ZIP codes inside King County: 33,846 (86 percent)

ZIP codes elsewhere in Washington state: 2,354 (6 percent)

ZIP codes outside Washington state: 3,316 (8 percent)

ZIP codes inaccurately recorded: 2,255

All Home King County data analyzed by The Seattle Times

In 2014, about 86 percent of the people who answered that question listed a ZIP code inside King County, and about 6 percent more listed a ZIP code elsewhere in the state, according to All Home records analyzed by The Seattle Times.

The records are an imprecise measure of where someone is from, Putnam admits. The ZIP code question isn't always asked the same way and may not be asked at all. About 30 percent of people don't answer the question. Others give inaccurate replies.

Some people experiencing homelessness don't access services at all.

The records shared with The Times tallied clients by ZIP code in 2014. Each client was counted only once, no matter how many different services he or she accessed or how many different times he or she accessed them. But a single client may have been counted twice in the records if he or she listed different ZIP codes at different times.

Finally, a last ZIP code of residence may paint an incomplete picture of the path someone took to arrive here; the person may have lived there for only a month or two.

The records show that more than 8,000 clients listed their last ZIP code as 98104, which covers Pioneer Square and downtown. That's about 25 percent of all clients who gave King County ZIP codes. Putnam says clients sometimes list ZIP codes for the shelters where they last stayed or the neighborhood where they'd been seeking services.

But the records are meaningful, nonetheless, Putnam says, because they can be compared year to year. Time and again, 85 to 90 percent of people accessing homeless services in King County list previous ZIP codes inside King County, he says.

"We have some data-quality issues," Putnam said. "But this is useful information."

Reasons for upswing

Putnam says homelessness has grown here for various reasons, including rising rents, population growth and cuts in aid from the state and federal governments.

That view is shared by Barbara Poppe, a consultant advising Seattle Mayor Ed Murray on homelessness. Communities nationwide consistently report about 80 percent of

clients as local and about 90 percent as from their state, Poppe, who led President Obama's homelessness work for five years, said in an interview last month.

Some people do move to King County, at least in part, because of the homeless services here, which are better than those in most areas. Only New York City and Los Angeles provide more housing units and shelter beds for homeless people than Seattle.

Based on All Home's ZIP code records, California sent more people to King County than any other state in 2014, followed by Oregon, Texas, Florida, Nevada and Georgia.

Putnam has heard stories about small cities with scarce resources sending their homeless people to Seattle, he says, and officials here and in other areas sometimes buy bus tickets for people with friends or relatives to stay with elsewhere. But transplants aren't causing Seattle's homelessness crisis, Putnam and Poppe insist.

Mayors across the country used to complain to Poppe about their cities absorbing homeless people from other areas, she said. There have even been rumors in Hawaii about Seattle police buying homeless people plane tickets to the islands, she noted.

"There's no way all these cities have the Mecca theory under way," Poppe said.

Whether people are from King County or not, they deserve help, Putnam added.

"Good people in bad situations"

It didn't take long to find people from and not from the Puget Sound area outside the Urban Rest Stop hygiene center in Ballard on Friday.

Danny Bradley, a Brooklyn native, arrived in Seattle eight months ago, he said.

Bradley, 50, had been in Phoenix since 2001 when he and two friends working as pedicab operators there decided to spend a summer in Seattle doing the same.

"Things didn't work out like I planned," he recalled, saying he spent his savings on the temporary move north. "I ended up not having the job. Now I'm stuck."

Bradley has been sleeping in a tent under the Spokane Street Viaduct in Sodo.

“This has been a nightmare, because I’m not from here,” the former security guard said. “People steal from you. The wind. The rain. The cold — my fingers and toes.”

Despite Seattle’s homeless-friendly reputation, Bradley has struggled to get off the street here, he said, calling the city’s homeless-services system “very confusing.”

“I won’t say (the reputation) is a myth, but it’s not as good as it sounds,” he said.

Marty Robinson sees things differently. Raised in Tacoma, the 52-year-old had been working as a commercial fisherman when a wave knocked debris off a pallet into his head, he said. Robinson’s neck was badly injured. That was seven years ago.

“It changed my life,” said Robinson, who hasn’t worked much since the accident.

Now spending his nights at a homeless shelter in Ballard, Robinson said experiencing homelessness has given him more appreciation for the area he’s from.

“I’ve seen how Seattle helps people. If this had to happen, it couldn’t have happened in a better place,” he said. “This city has a heart of gold. I’m proud to be from here.”

Most people Robinson meets on the street are from the area, he said. He thinks rents driven up by tech workers moving to Seattle have something to do with it.

“You have lots of good people in bad situations here,” he said. “The city is changing but this issue isn’t going to go away. We’re not going to go away. This is our home.”

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The map on the next page shows where people who accessed homeless services in Seattle and King County in 2014 said their last zip code of residence was. To view the entire interactive map, please access the article here:

<http://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/king-countys-homeless-are-overwhelmingly-from-here-service-providers-say/>, and then click on the link to the interactive map.

Where King County's homeless come from

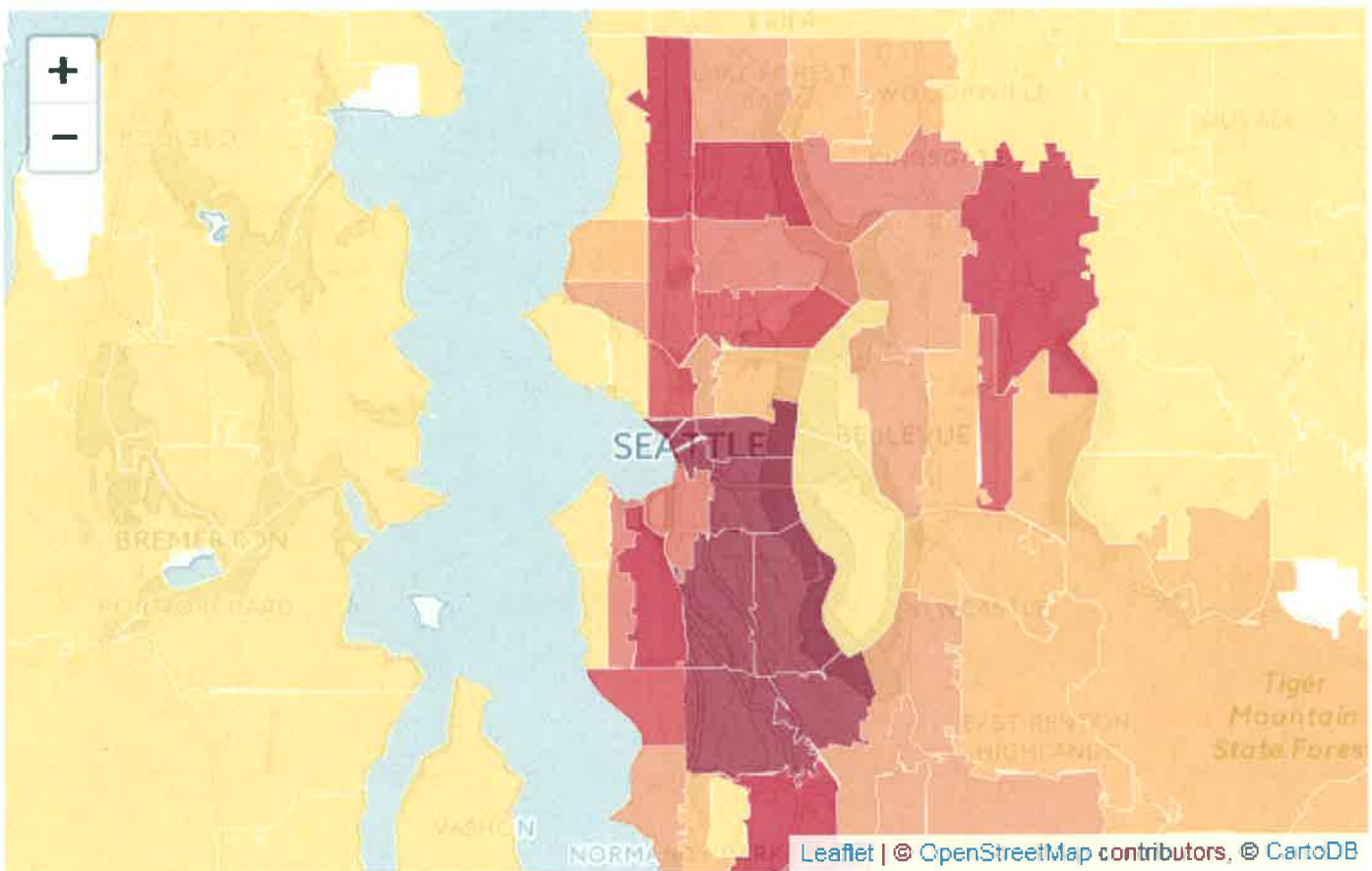
This map shows where people who accessed homeless services in Seattle and King County in 2014 said their last ZIP code of residence was. It shows the number of clients for each ZIP code within Washington state and the total number of clients for each other state. Click on a zip code or state to see the number.

Zoom to:

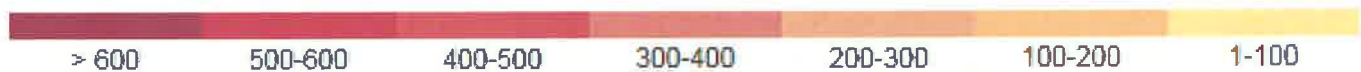
Seattle

Washington state

United States



MAP LEGEND



Source: All Home King County data analyzed by The Seattle Times

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