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EVALUATION

Just Home:

Understanding Cycles of Housing Instability and Justice Involvement in Missoula County

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Disclaimer

This report was prepared by the Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities at the University of Montana as part of the Just Home initiative, in partnership with Homeword, Inc. and the Missoula County Community Justice Department. The findings and conclusions presented herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views or official policies of the University of Montana, Homeword, Inc., Missoula County, the Urban Institute, or the MacArthur Foundation. The information in this report is intended to support community understanding. It is not intended to serve as legal advice or as a prescriptive policy document.

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Finally, this work was conducted on the traditional lands of many Indigenous peoples, including the Selis (Salish), Ksanka (Kootenai), and Qlispe (Kalispel). In the context of a report on homelessness and justice involvement, we are mindful that these issues cannot be fully understood or addressed without reckoning with the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism and the systemic exclusion of Native peoples. As non-Native scholars, we also recognize that acknowledgements like these must be accompanied by tangible action. Our inclusion of local histories of settler colonialism and Indigenous resilience in this report reflects our commitment to ongoing efforts to rectify and repair these injustices.

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Executive Summary

Background and Purpose

The Just Home project in Missoula County, Montana, is part of a national program to advance community-driven efforts to address the intersection of housing instability and justice system involvement. With support from the MacArthur Foundation, the project is led by Homeword, Inc. and the Missoula County Community Justice Department. The initiative seeks to develop sustainable housing interventions that reduce incarceration and improve housing stability for populations at risk of being caught in cycles of homelessness and justice involvement.

To support this effort, Homeword, Inc. contracted with the University of Montana's Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities to conduct a community needs assessment. The assessment aimed to:

1. Identify populations most affected by the housing-justice involvement cycle in Missoula County;
2. Examine local contributing factors;
3. Understand barriers to housing stability among justice-involved individuals; and
4. Highlight opportunities for programmatic and policy coordination.

This summary synthesizes the study's key findings and recommendations for community partners committed to reducing incarceration and housing instability in Missoula County.

Methods

This report draws on both quantitative and qualitative data to examine the intersection of housing instability and justice involvement in Missoula County. Quantitative analysis included administrative data from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) and Missoula County Detention Facility (MCDF) booking records from 2018 to 2024, with focused attention on demographics, housing history, and offense types. Qualitative findings were generated through key informant interviews with 26 service providers and system personnel, as well as two "community pop-up" engagement activities in which over 60 youth and unhoused, justice-involved adults participated. This mixed-methods approach allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of who is affected by the housing-justice cycle and the systemic factors contributing to it.

Key Findings

1. Housing Insecurity and Justice Involvement are Interconnected
Justice system involvement and housing instability are mutually reinforcing. Many people experiencing homelessness are justice-involved and vice versa. The most common charges among unhoused individuals booked into jail were for low-level offenses such as failure to appear, trespassing, and disorderly conduct—many of which stem from the challenges of being unhoused.

2. Native Americans and Other Marginalized Groups Face Disproportionate Impacts
Native Americans make up just 2% of Missoula County's population but represent 15% of the unhoused population and 25% of unhoused individuals booked into jail. Black and African American individuals also face disproportionate impacts despite being a small portion of the county's population.

3. Transition-Aged Youth are Especially Vulnerable
Youth and young adults (ages 17–25) with involvement in foster care or the justice system are at elevated risk of both homelessness and justice involvement, often due to aging out of foster care or group homes. They are less likely to access shelters, more likely to experience "hidden homelessness," and face unique barriers due to lack of rental history or adult support.

4. Structural and Bureaucratic Barriers Undermine Housing Stability
Numerous systemic challenges prevent individuals with criminal records from securing housing. People with felonies, especially violent or sexual offenses, or certain drug-related convictions face legal exclusions from HUD-funded affordable housing and are frequently denied by private landlords. Beyond legal restrictions, justice-involved individuals often lack stable income, legal documents, or phone/internet access upon release from jail, making it difficult to complete housing applications or maintain eligibility for benefits. Additionally, bureaucratic hurdles disproportionately impact people without a stable address, leading to lost waitlist placements or gaps in services. These logistical and administrative burdens compound the effects of stigma and discrimination, leaving many justice-involved individuals without viable housing options.

5. Current Resources Show Promise, But Gaps Remain
Programs like Shelter Court, Resource Access Days, and the Watershed Navigation Center illustrate growing cross-sector collaboration. However, Missoula lacks transitional housing specifically for justice-involved individuals, and there are not enough culturally supportive services for Native Americans or behavioral health supports for people with co-occurring mental health and substance use issues.

Recommendations

Based on the assessment's findings, we offer several recommendations to guide local housing and justice system reform:

Expand Housing Interventions for Justice-Involved and Unhoused Individuals

- Prioritize Housing First as a foundational approach, ensuring low-barrier access to stable housing with voluntary supportive services.
- Develop transitional housing options with case management for individuals exiting incarceration, including reentry housing and sober living programs.
- Expand housing vouchers for justice-involved individuals and pair them with employment support and other supportive services.

Create Youth-Focused Housing and Support Services

- Establish low-barrier, youth-specific emergency shelters and transitional housing programs.

- Implement master leasing and rapid rehousing models to provide flexible, short-term rental support for transition-aged youth.
- Expand life-skills training and housing navigation services to help young people transition successfully into independent living.

Advance Culturally Grounded, Native-Led Solutions

- Support Indigenous-led housing initiatives and peer mentorship programs tailored for Native communities.
- Ensure cultural competency training for service providers and increase Indigenous representation in housing and justice services.
- Explore reparative housing and land initiatives to address historical displacement and housing instability among Native populations.

Reduce Criminalization and Improve Reentry Support

- Oppose policies that criminalize survival activities like sleeping/camping outdoors and instead invest in housing-based solutions.
- Improve coordination between detention centers, probation/parole offices, and housing services to ensure stable reentry.
- Expand peer support and case management during and after incarceration to prepare individuals for successful reintegration.

Address Stigma and Promote Inclusion

- Implement public education campaigns to shift narratives and reduce stigma around homelessness and justice involvement.
- Encourage landlord and employer engagement to reduce barriers to renting and hiring for formerly incarcerated or unhoused individuals.
- Explore social enterprise and cooperative employment models that provide sustainable work and economic stability.

About This Report

Just Home

Homeword, Inc., a Missoula non-profit dedicated to supporting housing needs, and the Missoula County Community Justice Department identified the need to develop a housing intervention that aims to disrupt cycles of homelessness and justice involvement. With support from the MacArthur Foundation, the Just Home project in Missoula has engaged community partners, advocacy groups, and those with lived experience of incarceration and homelessness to determine the appropriate target population(s) for a housing intervention and the appropriate services to address the community's needs.

Homeword, Inc. contracted with the University of Montana's Rural Institute for Inclusive Communities as part of the Just Home project to conduct a needs assessment study to identify groups impacted by the justice system and housing insecurity, understand the barriers to housing stability faced by these groups, and use this information to support the development of the Just Home housing intervention.

This report examines the intersection of housing instability and justice system involvement in Missoula. The needs assessment study had four goals:

1. Identify specific populations affected by cycles of homelessness and justice involvement in Missoula County;
2. Identify local factors that contribute to cycles of justice involvement and housing insecurity;
3. Assess the barriers that justice-involved individuals face in securing and maintaining stable housing, as well as resource gaps in the community; and
4. Highlight opportunities for collaboration and provide evidence-based recommendations for reducing homelessness and justice involvement.

Methods

Understanding the intersection of justice involvement and homelessness requires a comprehensive approach that captures both broad patterns and individual experiences. This study employs a mixed-methods design, integrating information from the following sources:

- Quantitative data from the Missoula County Detention Facility (MCDF) jail booking records and the city's Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) to identify demographic trends and justice involvement among unhoused individuals in the county.
- Qualitative key informant interviews with 26 housing, healthcare, and justice system service providers, including youth-serving organizations, to explore barriers to housing stability and potential intervention strategies.

- Community pop-up events involving over 60 people with lived experience of housing insecurity, homelessness, and/or justice involvement to gain insight into their housing needs.

By drawing on multiple data sources, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the factors contributing to housing insecurity and justice system involvement, with the goal of informing strategies for community partners seeking to address barriers related to housing instability and justice involvement in Missoula.

The study design had multiple phases, beginning with preliminary information gathering, literature reviews, and exploratory discussions to establish relationships and data-sharing agreements. Next, we conducted key informant interviews with community partners and service providers and analyzed existing quantitative datasets. The last phase involved engaging people with lived experience of housing insecurity/homelessness about their barriers to stable housing and specific housing needs. Detailed methods for each phase of the study are provided in Appendix A.

How to Use This Report

This report is designed to serve as a resource for policymakers, service providers, and community stakeholders working to address housing instability and justice system involvement. It is organized into sections that outline the key findings and concludes with actionable recommendations for policy and programmatic improvements. A more detailed description of the methods used can be found in Appendix A. Readers can use this report to better understand the challenges facing justice-involved individuals experiencing homelessness, assess current gaps in service coordination, and explore potential strategies to improve housing access and reduce justice involvement.

Defining Justice-Involvement, Homelessness, and Housing Insecurity

For the purposes of this study, *justice involvement* refers to people who have had contact with the criminal justice system, including those who have been incarcerated in state prisons, local jails, juvenile detention centers, or placed on probation. This category includes people who have been incarcerated once or multiple times and may also include individuals with frequent arrests or police interactions without incarceration. For youth specifically, justice involvement can also refer to having parents or close family members who are currently or formerly incarcerated, as this can impact the young person's housing situation and access to resources.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), a person is considered *homeless/unhoused* if they lack a permanent, adequate nighttime residence.[1] This definition includes individuals staying in places not meant for human habitation, such as cars, abandoned buildings, or the streets. It also includes those using emergency shelters or temporary housing programs and individuals exiting institutional settings, such as jail, juvenile

detention, or a hospital, without a stable housing plan who were unhoused before entering the institution. Within the category of *youth homelessness*, many young people experience hidden homelessness, meaning they may not fit the traditional HUD definition because they rely on temporary accommodations, such as couch-surfing or staying with friends or relatives, rather than seeking formal shelter services. As a result, these youth are often underrepresented in homelessness data and may not qualify for certain housing programs despite their lack of a stable home.[2]

Many people experience *housing insecurity*, meaning they face a range of housing challenges that place them at risk of becoming unhoused.[3] Housing insecurity can include severe rent burden, where individuals or families struggle to pay rent and may miss payments. It can also involve frequent moves due to financial hardship, eviction, or unsafe living conditions. Some individuals, particularly youth, live in unstable arrangements, relying on temporary stays with friends, extended family, or informal caregivers without a permanent lease. Others endure substandard or unsafe housing conditions, lacking access to adequate plumbing, heating, or structural safety. Additionally, young people involved in the child welfare system, foster care, or juvenile detention often experience unstable housing transitions, increasing their likelihood of experiencing homelessness upon aging out of care.[4,5]

Measuring and Reporting on Race and Ethnicity

Measuring race and ethnicity is inherently complex. These identities are socially constructed, meaning their definitions and significance vary across cultures, historical periods, and contexts.[6] As a result, race and ethnicity are often measured inconsistently across data sources. For example, some surveys allow individuals to select multiple races and report ethnicity separately from race, while others do not.

Reporting population-level estimates by race also requires nuance. Aggregating racial subgroups can help illuminate broad patterns and disparities, but doing so can obscure meaningful differences within groups. For instance, combining diverse Indigenous communities into a single “American Indian/Alaska Native” category can mask the unique experiences and needs of specific tribal nations. An added layer of complexity arises for individuals who identify with more than one race. For example, someone who identifies as both White and American Indian is often categorized as multiracial. This can lead to the underrepresentation and erasure of Indigenous peoples and other minoritized groups.[7]

In this report, we primarily present data for individuals who identified with only one race and grouped those who selected more than one race into a “two or more races” category. However, it is important to acknowledge that many Missoula residents identify as both American Indian and another race. Whereas 2% of the population identifies as American Indian alone, an additional 3% identify as American Indian in combination with another race. For consistency, we use the more conservative 2% estimate when describing Missoula’s Native population, while recognizing that many multiracial individuals also identify as Native American.[7]

Background

Housing instability and incarceration are deeply interconnected. In recent years, Montana experienced an alarming increase in chronic homelessness (551% increase from 2007 to 2023) and homeless youth (76% increase from 2022 to 2023).[8] Housing challenges are compounded for people who are involved in the criminal justice system, many of whom report housing instability before entry into the justice system and who struggle to secure stable housing upon release. In Missoula County in 2023, nearly 1 in 5 booking charges (18%) were for individuals categorized as unhoused or without an address at the time of booking.

Racial disparities further compound the crisis, as Black and Indigenous people are disproportionately affected by both homelessness and justice system involvement.[8,9] In Missoula County, American Indian/Alaska Native individuals make up 2% of the population,[10] but account for approximately 15% of unhoused individuals according to the city's Homeless Management Information System. Similarly, 25% of unhoused individuals booked into the Missoula County Detention Facility in 2023 were American Indian or Alaska Native.

Youth and young adults in Missoula County also face significant challenges related to homelessness. In Missoula, from 2022-2024, 10% of unhoused individuals identified by the city's coordinated entry system were transition-aged youth (i.e., ages 17-24). Additionally, in 2022, transition-aged youth comprised 11% of bookings into the county jail in which the person booked was listed as unhoused or not having a permanent address. Youth are less likely to stay in shelters and instead may experience "hidden homelessness" (e.g., couch-surfing, staying with friends or relatives, or living in cars).[2,11] Consequently, they may be less likely to engage with services. Many unhoused youth have had involvement with foster care or juvenile justice systems and may be hesitant to re-engage with those systems when they age out.[12]

Before presenting our study findings, we first provide an overview of the study setting. This context is vital to understanding contemporary inequities in housing access and justice involvement.

Missoula County, Montana

Missoula County, located in western Montana, spans a mix of urban and rural areas, with the city of Missoula serving as a regional hub for healthcare, education, and social services. The county's estimated population in 2023 was 121,849, reflecting a trend of recent population growth.[10] Demographically, Missoula County is predominantly White, with approximately 86% of the county population identifying as White only.[10] The county also has a significant Indigenous population, with approximately 2% of the population identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native only and another 3% identifying as American Indian and some other race.[10] The Bitterroot Salish, whose ancestral territory includes the Missoula and Bitterroot Valleys, have deep historical and cultural ties to the area. The Blackfeet Nation also traditionally traveled through and occupied lands extending into what is now Missoula County. Today, the county encompasses parts of the Flathead Indian Reservation, which is home to the Confederated Salish, Kootenai, and Pend d'Oreille Tribes.[13]

Missoula residents' socio-economic status varies. The median household income in Missoula County from 2019-2023 was $71,246.[10] The county has recently seen a rapid rise in housing costs; in 2024, the median home price was around $550,000, compared to $310,000 in 2019.[14] Rent costs and availability have risen sharply as well, with over 50% of renter households reporting being cost-burdened (i.e., spending over 30% of income on rent and utilities) in 2023.[15] Rental vacancy rates have remained consistently low and the local waitlist for housing vouchers rose to over 2,100 people by the end of 2024.[16] These local issues of increasing housing costs, low housing availability, and high rent burden are not unique to Missoula, as similar trends exist at a state and national level.

In response, Missoula has seen growing local policy and community-based efforts to address housing insecurity. The city established an Affordable Housing Trust Fund in 2020 to support the development and preservation of affordable homes. Missoula's Housing Policy aims to increase housing supply, remove regulatory barriers, and expand supportive housing options. Reaching Home: Missoula's 10-Year Plan to End Homelessness, launched by the city of Missoula in 2012, provided a coordinated framework for addressing homelessness through a housing-first model and cross-sector collaboration. In early 2025, the city released an updated strategic plan for addressing homelessness (On Our Way Home: Missoula Community Houselessness Strategy 2025-2028), which has been adopted and supported by multiple community agencies.

Multiple organizations and coalitions play active roles in this work. The Just Home Project, led by Homeword, Inc. and the Missoula County Community Justice Department in partnership with the Urban Institute and the MacArthur Foundation, focuses specifically on the intersection of housing instability and justice system involvement. Many other city and county departments, non-profit organizations, and community-based groups contribute to outreach, shelter, permanent supportive housing, and systems-change efforts across Missoula. Together, these efforts reflect a shared commitment to addressing housing insecurity and advancing equitable access to housing across the county.

To fully understand the challenges Missoula County faces today—particularly the intersection of housing instability and justice system involvement—it is necessary to situate these issues within a historical framework. Contemporary disparities in housing and criminal justice are not isolated or incidental; rather, they are rooted in the long-standing structures of settler colonialism and racial exclusion that shaped the development of the American West. The following section explores how policies of removal, land dispossession, assimilation, and racial exclusion created the foundation for ongoing inequities that continue to disproportionately impact Indigenous and Black communities in Montana, including those living in and around Missoula.

Settler Colonialism and Structural Inequities in the American West

In Montana, the history of racial land and housing policies reflect a broader colonial project—one that aimed to remove, assimilate, and control Indigenous peoples through violence, systemic displacement, legal restrictions, and economic disenfranchisement.[6]

Colonization in the American West was a pivotal time in U.S. history, particularly for Indigenous peoples. Following the Civil War and Reconstruction, Euro-American settlers expanded into

territories long inhabited by Native communities. This process, known as settler colonialism, was not just about settling the land, but about having permanent, exclusive control over it.[17,18] Settler colonialism was both a military conquest and a cultural campaign to eliminate or forcibly assimilate Native peoples into White settler society. For Euro American Whites and other racial groups, land ownership became a symbol of birthright, power, and a sense of belonging.[17] For Indigenous communities, this meant displacement, loss of sovereignty, and the systemic destruction of their cultures and ways of life.[19]

Through settler colonialism, Native peoples were displaced from their lands and then expected to assimilate to the practices and values of Euro-American settlers. The deculturation process, in which Indigenous groups were stripped of their languages, traditions, and ways of life through enslavement and displacement, was integral to settler colonial policies.[18] These policies often revolved around the seizure of tribal lands, which was essential not only for economic exploitation but also for the consolidation of settler power.

The consequences of settler colonialism are still felt today in Montana, where housing and criminal justice disparities continue to disproportionately affect Native communities.[18] Policies and practices that sought to assimilate or eliminate Indigenous peoples laid the groundwork for systemic issues that persist in both the housing market and the justice system.[20] The forced relocation of Native populations, land dispossession, and continued cultural suppression have left lasting scars. These historical injustices continue to impact Native peoples' access to housing, their involvement in the criminal justice system, and their overall well-being in the state. However, despite these injustices and inequities, Native Americans across Montana have worked to preserve their culture, languages, and traditional lifeways.

In Montana, as across the U.S., the legacy of settler colonialism is not a distant memory. It is embedded in policies and practices that continue to create and perpetuate racial and economic disparities.[6] Addressing these issues requires a clear understanding of the ways in which historical processes of assimilation and elimination shaped the structures that still impact Native communities today.

Removal and Reservation System

The 19th century in Montana was a period of violent displacement in which Native people were forcefully removed from their homeland to allow for the encroachment of White settlers moving further west. During the removal era, violence against and mass killings of Native people by White settlers were not only common but often state-sanctioned, resulting in a significant reduction of the Native American population in Montana territory by the early 1870s.[19] The U.S. government's emphasis on removal of Native peoples formally ended with the Civil War, as the federal government decided that its policies of military conquest and forcible relocation of Native people were too costly to continue. Governmental attempts at removal of Native people and control of land then shifted to a period of treaty-making and creation of the reservation system. Reservations were established via treaty as territories reserved to Native people, who were expected to stay within the bounds of the reserve, regardless of their need to hunt and gather and regardless of their relationship to places of seasonal ceremony.[13,19] These confined territories rarely aligned with tribal seasonal movements or spiritual geographies.

In the Missoula region, this process was formalized through the 1855 Treaty of Hellgate, signed under pressure from the U.S. government by the Salish, Pend d'Oreille, and Kootenai.[13] The treaty established the Flathead Reservation in the Jocko Valley (now part of Lake and Sanders counties), as well as stating that a federal survey of the Bitterroot Valley would be conducted to determine whether the Bitterroot Salish would be better served by having a separate reservation or joining the Flathead Reservation.[21] The treaty also guaranteed that the Bitterroot Valley would not be opened to White settlement until such a survey was conducted. Based on these provisions, the Bitterroot Salish were led to believe they would remain in their ancestral homeland in the Bitterroot Valley. However, in direct violation of the treaty, no survey was ever conducted, and illegal White settlement of the Bitterroot Valley increased during the 1870s and 1880s. The U.S. government eventually ordered the forced relocation of the Bitterroot Salish to the reservation in 1891, which took place under military escort.[13] This displacement of the Bitterroot Salish from their homelands disrupted cultural, economic, and spiritual practices rooted in the land that includes present day Missoula County.

Assimilation and Cultural Suppression

After forcibly removing Indigenous peoples from their lands, U.S. policies shifted toward assimilation, aiming to erase Native identity through cultural suppression and legal and economic restrictions. Assimilation also encompassed the criminalization of culture and ceremony of Indigenous groups by White colonizers, laying the foundation for the disproportionate justice system involvement of Indigenous people today.[18]

After the forced relocation of the Bitterroot Salish from the Bitterroot Valley to the Flathead Reservation in 1891, the U.S. government and settler institutions implemented assimilation strategies that deeply affected Native communities in western Montana. Native children from the Flathead Reservation and surrounding areas, including the Missoula region, were often sent to St. Ignatius Mission boarding school, one of the earliest federally-supported Catholic mission schools in the area.[13] Like other boarding schools, St. Ignatius strictly enforced English-only policies, Christian teachings, and the suppression of Native language, ceremony, and identity. Children were often separated from their families for extended periods, and some never returned home.[17]

Despite efforts to dismantle Indigenous governance and cultural traditions, Native communities resisted through storytelling, language preservation, and grassroots activism. Many Indigenous leaders fought for and reclaimed sovereignty, shaping policies that continue to strengthen Native governance and self-determination today. In recent decades, the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes have been at the forefront of language revitalization, cultural preservation, and environmental stewardship, including the ownership and management of the CSKT Bison Range (formerly the National Bison Range), which was transferred to Tribal control in 2022.[13]

Allotment and the Economic Roots of Dispossession

As assimilation policies sought to erase Indigenous identity, the U.S. government also turned to land allotment as a means of dismantling tribal sovereignty.[19] The Allotment period came in response to the Depression of the late 1880s and early 1890s. A crash in silver and gold prices, labor riots, and increasing immigration in Montana's urban areas created economic instability, leading White settlers to seek tribal land as a solution.

Responding to pressure from settlers to expand land holdings in western territories, Congress enacted the General Allotment Act of 1887, also known as the Dawes Act.[19] While the foremost purpose of the Dawes Act was to open tribal land to White settlers, many who supported it also expressly sought to break up Native governments, abolish the reservations, and assimilate Natives into non-Native society. Under the Dawes Act, communal reservation lands were broken up into individual parcels, in which the head of each Native American household was given 160 acres of farmland or 320 acres of grazing land, and the "surplus" was sold to non-Native settlers.[19] Nationally, the allotment process resulted in the loss of over 100 million acres of land from tribal ownership and control.

Montana's 1889 state constitution embedded the federal government's power over tribal land, denying Native communities legal ownership and enabling widespread land loss.[17,18] The Dawes Act and its application through the Flathead Allotment Act of 1904 broke up communal tribal lands on the Flathead Reservation, leading to massive land loss for the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribes and opening the door to economic disenfranchisement, limited control over tribal resources, and a diminished ability to maintain cultural practices tied to the land.[13,21]As a result, the Flathead Reservation became one of the most heavily settled reservations by non-Native people in the U.S.[13,17]

Criminalization of Native Culture and Governance

As the U.S. government sought to force Indigenous peoples to assimilate to White settler society, it also weaponized the legal system to criminalize Native cultural practices, governance, and ways of life – further controlling Indigenous communities through surveillance, punishment, and incarceration. New laws in the mid to late 19th century criminalized many aspects of Native life, including plural marriages, traditional medicinal practices, and even customary mourning rituals such as destroying property of the deceased.[18] Native people who did not conform to Euro-American labor norms were also subject to legal punishment.

Despite criminalization efforts, Indigenous communities developed powerful resistance movements, maintaining their traditions in secret, creating new legal strategies, and advocating for their rights. These efforts have led to contemporary legal victories, including the restoration of tribal courts and the reaffirmation of Indigenous self-governance.

Racial Exclusion of Black Communities in Settler Society

While the framework of settler colonialism is often examined through the lens of White-Indigenous relations, African Americans in the West also navigated colonial structures – both as participants in and victims of a system designed to privilege White settlers.[17] Similarly to Euro-American settlers following the Civil War and Reconstruction, many Black people saw the Western frontier as a land of opportunity, offering refuge from racial violence and economic oppression of the post-slavery South. Despite facing exclusionary policies, Black Montanans built strong communities, established churches, businesses, and advocacy groups, and contributed significantly to Montana's economic and cultural development. These communities provided crucial support in the face of discrimination, fostering resilience and shaping the state's history in profound ways. However, while some sought to build new communities in the West, they encountered legal, social, and economic barriers that reinforced White settler

dominance, including exclusion from jobs, housing segregation, and laws designed to limit their full participation in society. In many cases, Black Americans were denied entrance into the newly developing communities in the West entirely.[17]

One of the most explicit methods of racial exclusion in the West was through marriage laws. Interracial marriage between Native women and White men was initially accepted to gain control and ownership of tribal land.[17] However, interracial marriage was completely prohibited between White people and other racial groups by Montana law in 1909, with the effect of reinforcing racial hierarchies and preventing Black people from integrating into settler society on equal terms.[17]

Racial exclusion also shaped labor practices. African Americans were systematically prohibited from working in many industries or were placed in positions with the worst conditions and the lowest pay.[17] In Anaconda, copper mills unions denied Black workers membership for decades, while in Butte, African Americans were prohibited from working in the mines. In Missoula, forestry labor was dominated by White workers, with Black laborers largely excluded from these jobs. These restrictions confined Black workers to low-wage positions with poor conditions, reinforcing economic marginalization.

Housing segregation in Montana further reinforced exclusionary practices directed towards African Americans. Though formal racial covenants or redlining maps were more common in urban centers outside Montana, zoning regulations and discriminatory real estate practices, in addition to economic disparities, further restricted where Black families could live.[17] In Billings, Black residents were concentrated almost exclusively in the city's triangular southside neighborhood. Black families were often denied home loans or steered away from White neighborhoods. These barriers not only confined Black residents to segregated areas with fewer resources, but also limited access to higher-quality schools, stable homeownership, and long-term economic stability.[17]

An Enduring Legacy

Federal and state policies of removal, assimilation, land dispossession, and criminalization of Native Americans formed the foundation of ongoing disparities that continue to shape the experiences of Indigenous Montanans today. The legacy of these policies is evident in high rates of housing insecurity, economic marginalization, and disproportionate involvement in the criminal justice system among Native communities. The legal and social structures that once sought to erase Indigenous identity now manifest in systemic inequities, from the over-policing of Native people to barriers in accessing stable housing and economic opportunities. Similarly, African Americans in Montana faced economic exclusion, labor discrimination, and housing segregation that restricted their ability to build wealth and secure stable communities. These intersecting histories of racial exclusion continue to shape disparities in housing and justice-involvement for both Indigenous and Black Montanans today.

Study Findings

In the following section, we present the results of our community needs assessment on the intersection of housing instability and justice system involvement in Missoula. First, we present findings on demographic trends among individuals experiencing homelessness and justice involvement, drawing on data from the city's Homeless Management Information System and Missoula County Detention Facility jail booking records. Next, we describe key themes related to housing insecurity and justice involvement from our interviews with 26 housing, healthcare, and justice system service providers. Finally, we highlight the perspectives and needs of people with lived experience of housing insecurity, homelessness, and/or justice involvement who participated in our community pop-up events.

Demographic Overview: Homelessness & Justice Involvement in Missoula

We drew on two primary sources of administrative data to identify the demographics and circumstances of individuals who are unhoused and justice-involved: (1) Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data provided through the Missoula Coordinated Entry System and (2) booking incidents from the Missoula County Detention Facility (MCDF) combined with court appointments data maintained by county law enforcement. For more information on data sources and information collected, please see Appendix A.

We analyzed data from the HMIS and MCDF databases to identify and describe the demographics and characteristics of individuals who are experiencing homelessness and/or justice involvement in Missoula. Below, we present results for all unhoused individuals in the HMIS database who entered the Missoula Coordinated Entry System (MCES) between 2022-2024 and unhoused individuals who were booked in the MCDF for the same period. We also present results specifically about transition-aged youth (defined in the HMIS data as unhoused individuals ages 17-24 and in the MCDF data as ages 18-24) because this was identified by our community partners as a population of interest.

Characteristics of Individuals Experiencing Homelessness in Missoula

We used HMIS data to report demographic information about the population of unhoused or housing insecure individuals who entered the MCES. Table 1 displays information on demographics and other key social indicators of unhoused or housing insecure individuals who were captured in the HMIS database from 2022-2024. To ensure consistency across individuals, we chose to exclude individuals with missing data on primary indicators for gender, race/ethnicity, age, and prior living situation. This resulted in a total of 1,604 individuals included in our analysis.

Table 1. HMIS Data: Demographics, Prior Living Situation, and Social Indicators among Unhoused/Housing Insecure Individuals in Missoula, 2022-2024 (n=1604)

Characteristic	Missoula Unhoused Population		Missoula City Population[22,23]	
	Total	%	Total	%
Gender/sex				
Men	1,007	63%	36,998	49%
Women	564	35%	38,602	51%
Transgender or non-binary	33	2%	-	-
Race/ethnicity				
White, non-Hispanic	1,089	68%	64,392	85%
Native American	246	15%	1,481	2%
Black or African American	49	3%	546	1%
Hispanic/Latino	112	7%	4,085	5%
All other racial groups	12	1%	1,008	1%
Two or more races	144	9%	5,737	8%
Median age	42*	-	35*	-
Transition-aged youth	157	10%	12,196	16%
Prior living situation				
Unhoused/housing insecurity	910	57%	-	-
Living with family or friends	283	18%	-	-
Owned or rental	257	16%	-	-
Hospital, psychiatric, sober living, or long-term care	85	5%	-	-
Jail/prison/juvenile detention	57	4%	-	-
Foster care	12	1%	-	-
Other social indicators				
Veteran status	182	11%	4,715	6%
Mental health issues	253	16%	-	-
Experienced domestic violence	105	7%	-	-
TOTAL	**1,604**		**75,600**	

The data from Table 1 indicates there are notable demographic differences between individuals experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity and the total population for the city of Missoula. Men are disproportionately represented in the HMIS database (63%) compared to the city population (49%), whereas women make up about one-third of individuals in the HMIS. Native American individuals are also significantly overrepresented. While Native Americans make up only about 2% of Missoula's overall population, they account for 15% of individuals in the HMIS. Black/African American individuals also appear to be overrepresented in the unhoused population (3%) compared to city population estimates (1%). However, caution should be used in interpreting these proportions, given the small number of Black/African American individuals in the HMIS. In contrast, non-Hispanic White individuals in Missoula are underrepresented in the HMIS (68%) compared to the proportion of non-Hispanic White residents in the city population (85%).

Considering other social factors, the data indicate that veterans were also overrepresented in the HMIS (11%) compared to the city population (6%). Over half of individuals (57%) reported homelessness or housing insecurity as their primary living situation prior to entering the MCES. Relevant to the intersection of homelessness and justice involvement, almost 10% of individuals entering the MCES reported exiting jail, prison, or some kind of institutional care setting prior to entering the system. This suggests that institutional involvement of unhoused or housing insecure individuals may create a revolving door of re-institutionalization and release into homelessness. In addition, 16% of unhoused individuals in the MCES reported experiencing mental health issues and 7% experienced domestic violence.

Justice System Involvement Among Unhoused Individuals

Table 2 provides descriptive information about a smaller population of unhoused or housing insecure individuals who answered "*yes*" when asked if they interacted with the police or were jailed in the 6 months prior to entering the MCES (n=370). The table only provides information for this specific subgroup and thus is not representative of all unhoused individuals who are justice-involved. Justice system involvement is notable among both men (54%) and women (45%). Interestingly, women comprised a larger share of the individuals who reported interaction with the police or jail time in the past 6 months compared to the proportion of women in the overall HMIS data (35%; see Table 1).

Table 2 also shows that the racial/ethnic composition of those individuals who reported interaction with police or jail time was similar to that of the overall population of individuals in the HMIS. Specifically, Native Americans and Whites who were unhoused and reported interaction with police (17% and 69%) were proportional to their overall racial representation in the HMIS data (15% and 68%; see Table 1). This suggests that justice system involvement can be a co-occurring challenge for individuals experiencing housing instability, regardless of race or ethnicity.

Table 2. Missoula HMIS Data: Demographics among Unhoused/Housing Insecure Individuals with Prior Interaction with the Police, 2022-2024 (n=370)

Characteristic	Total	Percent
Gender/sex		
Men	200	54%
Women	167	45%
Transgender or non-binary	3	1%
Race/ethnicity		
White, non-Hispanic	257	69%
Native American	64	17%
African American	11	3%
Hispanic/Latino	26	7%
All other racial groups	1	0%
Two or more races	21	6%
TOTAL	**370**	

Note. Data was not available for all individuals in the HMIS. Table includes 370 individuals who reported interaction with police or spending time in jail within 6 months of entering the MCES.

Characteristics of Youth Experiencing Homelessness in Missoula

We examined descriptive information about the population of unhoused or housing insecure youth (i.e., ages 17-24) in Missoula in comparison to adults ages 25 and older. Table 3 displays information on demographics and key social indicators about youth and older adults who were captured in the HMIS database as unhoused or housing insecure from 2022-2024. The data indicate there are differences between youth and older individuals experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity. While men comprise most of both transition-aged youth and older adult cohorts, young women ages 17-24 represent a somewhat larger share of their age group (40%) compared to older women (35%). Additionally, Native Americans appear to be even more disproportionately represented among unhoused youth (25%) than among older adults (14%).

Both youth (54%) and older adults (57%) reported homelessness or housing insecurity as their primary living situation prior to entering the MCES at similar rates. However, other prior living situations differed between the two age groups. Youth were more likely to report having lived with family or friends (31%) prior to entry compared to older adults (16%). Notably, fewer young people reported coming out of jail, prison, juvenile detention, or institutional settings (4%) than older adults (10%). These patterns suggest that young adulthood is a critical period

for intervention, with the potential to deflect youth from justice involvement by addressing housing instability early.

Table 3. Missoula HMIS Data: Characteristics of Transition-Aged Youth and Older Adults, 2022-2024 (N = 1604)

	Transition-Aged Youth, 17-24		**Adults 25 and Older**		**TOTAL**
	Total	Percent	Total	Percent	
Gender/sex					
Men	84	54%	923	64%	**1,007**
Women	63	40%	501	35%	**564**
Transgender/non-binary	10	6%	23	2%	**33**
Race/ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic	84	54%	1,005	69%	**1,089**
Native American	39	25%	207	14%	**246**
Black/African American	5	3%	44	3%	**49**
Hispanic/Latino	19	12%	93	6%	**110**
All other racial groups	0	-	12	1%	**12**
Two or more races	17	11%	127	9%	**144**
Prior living situation					
Unhoused/housing insecurity	85	54%	825	57%	**910**
Living with family or friends	49	31%	234	16%	**283**
Owned or rented	12	8%	245	17%	**257**
Hospital, psychiatric inpatient, sober living, or long-term care	5	3%	80	6%	**85**
Jail/prison/juvenile detention	1	1%	56	4%	**57**
Foster care	5	3%	7	0%	**12**
Other social indicators					
Veteran status	4	3%	178	12%	**182**
Mental health disorder	22	14%	231	16%	**253**
Domestic violence	10	6%	95	7%	**105**
TOTAL	**157**	**10%**	**1,447**	**90%**	**1,604**

Patterns of Justice Involvement Among Unhoused Individuals: MCDF Bookings

We used data on jail bookings from the MCDF to understand patterns of justice involvement among unhoused individuals in Missoula. Table 4 displays the demographics of individuals listed as unhoused or not having an address at the time of booking into the county jail, as well as demographics for all individuals (i.e., housed and unhoused) booked, for the year 2023. The table also compares these groups to demographics for the overall Missoula County population.

The results indicate within-gender similarities between all individuals booked into jail and unhoused individuals only. Men accounted for 73% of all individuals booked into the county jail, as well as 73% of only those listed as unhoused at the time of booking, despite making up only approximately half of the county population. Conversely, while women make up approximately half of the county population, they comprised only 27% of all individuals and 27% of unhoused individuals who were booked into the county jail for 2023. These findings indicate that men are disproportionately represented in jail bookings, which aligns with well-documented gender differences in justice involvement nationally (Council on Criminal Justice, 2024). The data also suggest these gender discrepancies in jail bookings do not vary as a function of housing status.

Notably, Native Americans comprised a larger share of unhoused individuals who were booked into jail than among all individuals booked. Specifically, Native Americans comprised 25% of unhoused individuals booked in jail in 2023, compared to 17% of all individuals booked – a 38% difference. Even more strikingly, while Natives Americans make up fully one-quarter of individuals who are unhoused and booked, they only comprise 2% of the city population. This suggests both that Native Americans are disproportionately represented in the jail population and that unhoused Native Americans may be even more likely than their housed counterparts to be booked into jail. Racial analyses show similar trends for Black or African American individuals, though the numbers are small.

In 2023, transition-aged youth (i.e., ages 18-25) accounted for 9% of all bookings into the county jail for individuals recorded as unhoused or not having an address at the time of booking. Interesting, this is somewhat lower than the proportion of youth among all individuals booked into the county jail (13%) and for the overall population of young adults in Missoula County (13%). This may reflect the fact that transition-aged youth are in general less likely to consider themselves homeless/unhoused and thus may have been more likely to be listed as housed or having an address at the time of booking.

Table 4. MCDF Data: Demographics for Unhoused and All Individuals Booked, 2023 (n= 817; n=3619)

	Unhoused MCDF Population		**MCDF Booking Population**		**Missoula County Population** [15,24]	
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%
Gender/sex						
Men	600	73%	2,629	73%	60,127	50%
Women	217	27%	990	27%	59,512	50%

Race/ethnicity						
White, non-Hispanic	527	65%	2,636	73%	102,631	86%
Native American	206	25%	624	17%	2,474	2%
African American	54	7%	136	4%	716	1%
Hispanic/Latino	14	2%	105	3%	5,902	5%
Other/Unknown	16	2%	118	3%	2,029	2%
Two or more races	-	-	-	-	7,984	7%
Median Age	37*	-	36*	-	38*	-
Youth ages 18-25	72	9%	483	13%	15,273	13%
TOTAL	**817**		**3,619**		**119,639**	

Trends Over Time in Jail Bookings

Tables 5-6 display recent trends in the number of jail bookings, providing context for the gender, race, and age representation of unhoused individuals who were booked into the county jail over time. General trends in overall jail bookings showed a significant decline in the overall number of individuals booked starting in 2020, which corresponds to local efforts to reduce jail populations during the COVID-19 pandemic.[25] However, the number of jail bookings began increasing again in 2022 and by 2023 had rebounded to pre-pandemic levels. Thus, the general reductions in the number of unhoused individuals booked into the county jail from 2020-2022 seen in Table 5 are likely representative of COVID-related policies.

Table 5. Unhoused Individuals Booked into MCDF by Gender, 2018 - 2024 (n=4781 total)

Year	Men		Women		Unknown		TOTAL
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	
2018	525	79%	136	21%	0	0%	**661**
2019	618	78%	172	22%	0	0%	**790**
2020	486	78%	134	22%	0	0%	**620**
2021	457	79%	118	21%	0	0%	**575**
2022	448	73%	162	27%	0	0%	**610**
2023	600	73%	217	27%	0	0%	**817**
2024	458	65%	208	29%	42	6%	**708**
TOTAL	**3,592**		**1,147**		**42**		**4,781**

Table 5 also displays gender differences for men and women over time among unhoused individuals booked into jail. While the patterns for both men and women reflect the trend of COVID-related booking reductions followed by a rebound in bookings, there appears to be an increase in the proportion of women booked into jail starting in 2023 compared to pre-COVID levels. Although the proportion of women among unhoused individuals booked into jail remained stable at 21-22% from 2018 through 2021, this proportion increased to 27% for the years 2022-2023. This represents a 59% increase in the proportion of women among unhoused individuals booked into jail between 2018 and 2023. The overall number of unhoused women booked into jail has also increased, with over 200 women booked in both 2023 and 2024. This recent trend is particularly concerning given that national data suggest approximately three-quarters of all women in jail are mothers and that, prior to incarceration, mothers were over twice as likely as fathers to be the primary caretake for their children.[26] The trend may reflect increased interactions with police among unhoused women, an overall increase in the number of unhoused women in Missoula, or some combination of these and other unmeasured factors.

Table 6 shows racial differences in the proportions of unhoused individuals who were booked into jail for the years 2018-2024. The data indicate that unhoused Native Americans comprised a somewhat higher proportion of unhoused individuals booked into jail in the years following COVID-era policies than prior to the pandemic. For example, Native Americans represented 25% of all unhoused individuals booked into jail during 2023, compared to 20% of unhoused individuals in 2018. Black and African American individuals also showed a percent increase from 2022-2023, although the same trend was not reflected in the data from 2024. As with the gender differences noted above, these racial differences may reflect increased interactions with police among unhoused Native American and Black individuals, an overall increase in the number of unhoused Native American and Black individuals in Missoula, or some combination of these and other unmeasured factors.

Table 6. Unhoused Individuals Booked into MCDF by Race, 2018-2024 (n=4781 total)

Year	Native American		White		African American		Latino		Other/ Unknown		TOTAL
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	
2018	135	20%	493	75%	19	3%	8	1%	6	1%	**661**
2019	147	19%	577	73%	38	5%	20	3%	8	1%	**790**
2020	132	21%	424	68%	21	3%	36	6%	7	1%	**620**
2021	125	22%	399	69%	16	3%	16	3%	19	3%	**575**
2022	128	21%	429	70%	26	4%	13	2%	14	2%	**610**
2023	206	25%	527	66%	54	7%	14	2%	16	2%	**817**
2024	175	25%	472	67%	21	3%	21	3%	19	3%	**708**
TOTAL	**1,048**		**3,321**		**195**		**128**		**89**		**4,781**

Offense Types Among Unhoused Individuals Booked into Jail

To understand common reasons for booking among unhoused populations in Missoula, we examined booking incidents by type of offense for all booking incidents in which the individual booked was listed as unhoused or having no address for the year 2023 (see Table 7). We decided to focus on data from 2023 because this data reflected a complete year after COVID-related policies had been rescinded, whereas data available for 2024 did not include December booking incidents. Table 7 shows all incidents by charge type. It is important to note that Table 7 is displayed at the *incident* level, rather than individual level; in other words, if an individual was booked for multiple incidents within the same year, each incident is included below. Incident data follows the NIBRS guidance in which all incidents are included (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2023).

Notable patterns emerged in jail bookings by offense type among unhoused individuals. Specifically, failure to appear was the most common charge among unhoused individuals, comprising 25% of total bookings for this population in 2023. Assaults were also common for unhoused individuals charged in 2023 (15%).

Table 7. MCDF Booking Incidents Among Unhoused Individuals by Type of Offense, 2023 (n=1546)

Booking Offense Type	Total	Percent
Failure to Appear	382	25%
Assaults	235	15%
Drug/Narcotics	134	9%
Extra Jurisdictional Warrants	110	7%
Trespassing	101	7%
Probation Violation	97	6%
Disorderly Conduct	72	5%
Obstructing a Peace Officer	68	4%
Larceny/Theft	68	4%
Driving Under the Influence	61	4%
Burglary	42	3%
All Other Offenses	176	11%
TOTAL	**1,546**	100%

Justice Involvement Among Transition-aged youth

In this section, we focus on trends in justice involvement among transition-aged youth (defined in MCDF as ages 18-25). Table 8 shows a comparison of the number and percentage of unhoused transition-aged youth who were booked into the county jail with unhoused adults 26 and older. From 2018-2024, transition-aged youth accounted for 11% of all bookings into the county jail for individuals recorded as unhoused or not having an address at the time of booking. The proportion of unhoused youth booked into jail declined markedly starting in 2020 and has remained consistently lower over time, rather than rebounding to pre-COVID levels. Although it was outside the scope of the current study to understand potential reasons for these changes, they may reflect changes in policy or practice related to how unhoused youth and young adults are treated by police and the courts, such as an increased emphasis on diversion prior to arrest or other policy changes. It is also possible that the number of youths being classified as unhoused or having no address in the MCDF data has systematically changed since 2019, such that more young people were categorized as unhoused at the time of booking prior to 2020.

Table 8. Unhoused Individuals Booked into MCDF by Age Cohort, 2018-2024 (n = 4781)

Year	Transition-Aged Youth 18-25		Adults 26 and Older		All Unhoused Individuals	
	Total	%	Total	%	**Total**	**%**
2018	118	18%	543	82%	**661**	100%
2019	108	14%	682	86%	**790**	100%
2020	56	9%	564	91%	**620**	100%
2021	51	9%	524	91%	**575**	100%
2022	57	9%	553	91%	**610**	100%
2023	72	9%	745	91%	**817**	100%
2024	51	7%	657	93%	**708**	100%
TOTAL	**513**	**11%**	**4,268**	**89%**	**4,781**	100%

We conducted additional analyses on the offense type of failure to appear because it was the most common incident type among unhoused individuals. Examining total bookings for failure to appear among unhoused individuals across age cohorts, sex, and race, we found significant differences both within and between groups (see Table 9). Due to small sample sizes at this level of analysis, only comparisons for Native American versus White individuals are displayed; people from all other racial groups were collapsed and presented together.

For failure to appear charges among unhoused youth of both sexes, Native American individuals comprised the majority (40%) of bookings, despite making up only about one third (32%) of unhoused youth in Missoula (as captured in the HMIS database). Conversely, White

individuals made up only 35% of failure to appear bookings among unhoused youth, despite comprising about half (52%) of the unhoused youth in Missoula according to HMIS data. It is important to note that Native American youth may be undercounted in the HMIS database for a variety of reasons, although this undercounting is unlikely to fully explain the large disparities in jail bookings between Native American youth and their White peers.

Table 9 also illustrates important gender differences across different age cohorts and racial groups. Among unhoused transition-aged youth, the highest proportion of failure to appear bookings were for young Native American men. Specifically, Native American men made up 25% of failure to appear bookings among unhoused youth, whereas White men made up 20% of these bookings. Native American women and White women comprised smaller shares (15% each) of failure to appear bookings among unhoused youth.

Table 9. Unhoused Individuals Booked for Failure to Appear, 2023 (n=274)

	Men				Women						
Age	**Native American**		**White**		**Native American**		**White**		**All Other Racial Groups**		**TOTAL**
	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	Total	%	
18-25	5	25%	4	20%	3	15%	3	15%	5	25%	**20**
26-35	19	21%	46	51%	11	12%	8	9%	7	8%	**91**
36-45	14	14%	36	36%	14	14%	29	29%	7	7%	**100**
46-55	4	9%	25	58%	1	2%	11	26%	2	5%	**43**
55-65	6	35%	6	35%	0	0%	4	24%	1	6%	**17**
65+	0	0%	2	67%	0	0%	0	0%	1	33%	**3**
TOTAL	**48**	**18%**	**119**	**43%**	**29**	**11%**	**55**	**20%**	**23**	**8%**	**274**

Note: Percents are tabulated according to the total for each age cohort (i.e., percents add to 100% across rows). People from other racial/ethnic groups were collapsed into one column due to the small sample sizes at this level of analysis.

Key Takeaways from Local Housing and Jail Data

People experiencing homelessness, especially those living unsheltered, are disproportionately involved in the justice system.

Data from the MCDF show that 18% of jail bookings in 2023 were for individuals who self-identified as unhoused. Many of these individuals were booked for low-level, often preventable charges such as failure to appear (25% of bookings among unhoused individuals) and

trespassing (7%). These findings reinforce a pattern described by service providers: that individuals who are unhoused are frequently criminalized simply for surviving in public spaces.

Native American residents face severe and disproportionate impacts from both homelessness and justice system involvement.
Native Americans comprise only 2% of the Missoula County population but accounted for 15% of unhoused individuals and 25% of unhoused individuals booked into jail. This disparity reflects the ongoing effects of settler colonialism, structural racism, and disconnection from culturally grounded resources and supports.

Justice involvement is a co-occurring challenge for individuals experiencing housing insecurity.
In the HMIS data, 9% of individuals entering the Missoula Coordinated Entry System (MCES) between 2022 and 2024 reported coming directly from incarceration or institutional care. Among those who had interacted with police or spent time in jail in the previous six months, 45% were women, which was higher than their representation (35%) in the overall unhoused population. These data suggest that justice involvement and housing instability are deeply intertwined and often mutually reinforcing.

Women are increasingly represented among unhoused individuals booked into jail.
Although men still comprise the majority of unhoused individuals booked into jail (73% in 2023), the proportion of women increased significantly—from 21% in 2018 to 29% in early 2024. This trend raises concerns given the known collateral impacts of incarceration on women—especially mothers—and suggests that unhoused women may be increasingly vulnerable to criminal legal system contact.

Housing instability and justice involvement are compounding over time.
After a COVID-era dip in bookings, justice system involvement among unhoused individuals returned to pre-pandemic levels by 2023. This trend, seen across both men and women, points to the fragility of temporary system-level reductions and emphasizes the need for structural solutions that break long-term cycles of homelessness and incarceration.

Young adulthood is a critical period for upstream intervention.
Transition-aged youth (ages 17–24) made up 10% of individuals entering the MCES and 9% of unhoused individuals booked into jail. Fewer youth (4%) than older adults (10%) entered homelessness from incarceration, suggesting that many are entering homelessness for the first time and have not yet been drawn into deeper system involvement. Targeting support toward youth during this period, such as housing, case management, and culturally relevant services, may help prevent long-term justice system contact.

Failure to appear charges disproportionately affect Native American youth.
Among unhoused youth ages 18–25 booked into jail for failure to appear, Native American individuals made up 40% of bookings despite representing approximately one quarter of the unhoused youth population. Native American young men accounted for the largest share of these bookings. These disparities may reflect both structural barriers to court compliance, such as transportation and childcare, and deeper issues of legal system distrust rooted in historical and ongoing inequities.

Community Insights on Housing Insecurity & Justice Involvement

Below, we summarize findings from interviews with 26 service providers and professionals in the housing, criminal justice, and healthcare sectors regarding housing insecurity and justice involvement in Missoula. Findings are organized around three research questions:

1. What are the common factors that put people at risk for homelessness and justice involvement?
2. What are the barriers to housing for justice-involved individuals?
3. What resources already exist in Missoula for people experiencing homelessness and justice involvement, and where are there gaps?

Each subsection outlines the themes that emerged in response to these questions, highlighting the systemic challenges, structural barriers, and existing supports identified by participants.

Common Factors among Individuals Experiencing Homelessness and Justice Involvement in Missoula County

Interview participants identified common factors that put people at risk for homelessness and justice involvement. The themes below highlight the interconnected challenges of poverty, behavioral health, and service gaps. Our findings show how homelessness and justice involvement create a self-perpetuating cycle, where homelessness increases the likelihood of justice involvement, and justice involvement disrupts housing, creating long-term barriers to stable housing. This cycle also disproportionately affects Native Americans in Missoula, perpetuating the legacies of settler colonialism and systemic racism.

Common Factors Theme 1: Substance use and mental health frequently co-occur with both housing insecurity and justice involvement.

Participants cited substance use and mental health conditions as underlying causes of behaviors that may result in eviction and homelessness, which can then result in justice involvement. These behaviors may also lead to interactions with police and/or incarceration, which can then result in homelessness or housing insecurity. Additionally, substance use and mental health conditions are often exacerbated by homelessness and incarceration, creating a "downward spiral" or vicious cycle of homelessness and justice involvement. Participants also noted that trauma and social determinants of health may contribute to all these factors (mental health, substance use, homelessness, and justice involvement).

Common Factors Theme 2: Homelessness results in frequent police interactions and engaging in criminalized behaviors, especially for people living unsheltered.

Participants explained that living unsheltered or unhoused results in a lack of privacy and greater public scrutiny of behaviors, which increases contact with police (e.g., police calls from housed residents, conflict with other unhoused neighbors). People who are unhoused are commonly charged with trespass due to a lack of places they can legally spend time (including becoming "trespassed" from local shelters due to repeatedly violating rules). Theft and drug-related charges are also common for unhoused people, as are failure to appear warrants for not appearing in court. Overall, participants emphasized that homelessness both increases the

likelihood of engaging in criminalized behaviors and the likelihood that these behaviors will be observed by others, thus resulting in interactions with the justice system.

Common Factors Theme 3: Justice involvement can result in homelessness or housing insecurity through both immediate and delayed impacts.

Participants explained that certain kinds of criminal charges or police interactions can result in immediate eviction or displacement, such as no-contact orders in which someone cannot return to their home or certain kinds of criminal charges that may violate lease agreements. Participants also noted that incarceration can have a more delayed effect on housing, such that being incarcerated results in people not being able to pay rent, being evicted, and thus being unhoused upon release from jail or reentry from prison.

Common Factors Theme 4: Colonization, generational trauma, and ongoing racism have led to Native Americans being disproportionately affected by homelessness and justice involvement.

When asked, not all participants felt they could speak to racial disparities in Missoula in terms of housing and justice involvement. However, several participants noted that the local history of colonization and displacement of Native people from their ancestral homelands, families, and culture has resulted in disproportionate poverty, homelessness, and justice involvement among Native Americans. Participants explained that this legacy of displacement and dispossession has resulted in historical and intergenerational trauma that continues to impact Native Americans. Some also felt that structural and systemic racism contribute to over-policing or harsher sentencing for Black and Indigenous people.

Additionally, some participants noted that Missoula has more resources and services available than other areas in Montana, including reservations. Because of this, Native people may come to Missoula when they have nowhere else to go. Participants explained that Native Americans moving to Missoula from reservations may be disconnected from the protective elements of their tribal culture and family supports. Although Native American-specific resources exist in Missoula, people who were already facing homelessness or justice involvement prior to moving here may not know about these resources or how to connect to them while simultaneously trying to survive in an expensive urban area with limited connections to family or culture.

Housing Barriers for Justice-Involved Individuals

Interview participants described their observations about barriers to securing housing for individuals in Missoula with criminal records, histories of incarceration, or ongoing justice involvement. Identified barriers ranged from legal restrictions and discrimination in the private rental market to logistical and bureaucratic hurdles that justice-involved individuals face when trying to access housing.

Housing Barriers Theme 1: Criminal records pose a significant barrier to housing, especially for felonies and certain types of offenses, such as violent and sex offenses.

Nearly all participants saw having a criminal history as a barrier to housing, either in the private housing market or when qualifying for low-income housing or vouchers. People who are on the sexual or violent offender registry were described as “nearly impossible” to house because they are ineligible for HUD-funded housing vouchers, are prohibited by law from living in certain areas, and often will not be accepted by private landlords. Felonies pose bigger obstacles to

housing, and people with certain types of drug offenses are also ineligible for HUD assistance. People engaging in active substance use are typically not placed in affordable housing by the local housing authority, although this is decided on a case-by-case basis.

Housing Barriers Theme 2: The competitiveness of the private housing market in Missoula makes it hard for justice-involved people to compete for private housing.

Participants felt that in the context of Missoula's expensive and competitive housing market, disclosing a criminal history on a rental application is enough in most cases to send the application to "the bottom of the pile" for private landlords and property management companies. The need to show good credit, demonstrate rental history, and provide personal references on rental applications also pose substantial (and sometime insurmountable) barriers to people who have been incarcerated and/or unhoused. Participants described ways in which formerly incarcerated or unhoused people face discrimination and poverty-related stigma in applying for housing, such as being judged based on their appearances. Additionally, Native Americans may face discrimination in the private housing market and may experience intersectional stigma related to race, poverty, mental health, and/or substance use.

Housing Barriers Theme 3: Justice involvement and/or homelessness can result in a lack of necessities for obtaining housing, such as income, transportation, phone/internet connectivity, and needed benefits and services.

Participants explained that during incarceration or while on probation, people become ineligible for social security and other benefits that can take time to reinstate after release. If they were unhoused and receiving HUD-funded services prior to incarceration, they also lose their status as "literally homeless" after 90 days of incarceration and thus lose access to those services. Relationships with service providers and social support networks are disrupted during incarceration. Many are released from jail without money or their possessions, including IDs and other documentation. Participants noted that the lack of a consistent phone or internet connectivity was a major barrier for many of their clients when trying to complete paperwork and applications necessary to secure housing after release from jail or other institutional settings. In another example of a vicious cycle, participants described how people released from incarceration need employment and income to get a phone or housing but may struggle to find employment without phone or internet connectivity, housing, or reliable transportation.

Housing Barriers Theme 4: Bureaucracy and paperwork related to benefits and housing vouchers pose major barriers to housing.

Participants described onerous bureaucratic "red tape" and obstacles to receiving public housing assistance, such as the need to respond to a physical letter annually to retain their place on the years-long waitlist for housing vouchers. This kind of paperwork disproportionately impacts unhoused and/or justice-involved people who may not have a permanent mailing address, may be incarcerated and not receive the notification, or simply may struggle to complete and return the paperwork. A few participants felt that some people become overwhelmed or "give up" in the face of these hurdles and resort to life on the streets or in and out of jail as a more feasible alternative than trying to navigate such complex systems.

Current Resources

The themes in this section focus on existing resources in Missoula for people experiencing homelessness and justice involvement. Participants identified several programs and services that provide housing or shelter and opportunities for justice-involved individuals to engage with social services through new community-wide collaborations.

Current Resources Theme 1: Local low barrier shelters accept people with justice involvement; other shelters may have more barriers, especially related to substance use.

People with justice involvement are not excluded from staying at the Poverello Center or Johnson Street Shelter based solely on their criminal history or status, unless they have been "trespassed" from the shelters for patterns of behavior that violate shelter rules. Other shelters in town, such as those providing services to families and survivors of intimate partner violence, have higher barriers to access. For example, drug testing or sobriety requirements at these shelters may pose barriers for people with substance use disorders.

Current Resources Theme 2: Some resources exist for reentry and housing support post-incarceration, but they are currently limited and inconsistent.

Participants noted that there has been a peer-run reentry organization operating in Missoula in the past, but none were sure of its current status because it has struggled to maintain funding. Other justice-related housing resources include pre-release facilities for people who have been placed on parole or are on conditional release from prison. These facilities allow people who are finishing out a prison sentence to obtain a job and receive income while living in "dorm-style" facilities under strict monitoring. Probation and parole officers also have some discretionary transitional assistance funds for parolees that can cover short-term or one-time needs like hotels, clothes, and other necessities.

Current Resources Theme 3: Collaboration has increased between justice system stakeholders and social services to address the intersection of homelessness and justice involvement.

Participants named several recent programs and collaboration efforts in the area. While none are specifically focused on housing for justice-involved people, participants hoped these efforts will reduce or ameliorate justice involvement among unhoused people. For example, Shelter Court is a recent program in which unhoused people can resolve outstanding warrants for criminal misdemeanors and make initial court appearances via Zoom at the Poverello Center or Johnson Street Shelter once a month. Resource Access Days, held monthly at the library, are an opportunity for unhoused people to access multiple social service providers in one location, including obtaining pretrial assistance and checking in on pending cases. Participants also shared high hopes for the new Watershed Navigation Center, which is located next to the jail and is not yet fully operational but is intended to serve as a hub for social and healthcare services, case management, and reentry support. Watershed is intended to focus on providing culturally appropriate care for chronically unhoused and formerly incarcerated people, many of whom are Native American.

Resource Gaps

The following themes describe the existing resource gaps for people experiencing homelessness and/or justice involvement. These resource gaps centered on the lack of adequate healthcare, mental health care, and substance use treatment in the state, the lack of dedicated housing

programs or resources for justice-involved people, and the need for more transitional housing and reentry support for people exiting incarceration. Participants also described resource gaps and system failures for Native American people that cut across housing, legal, first responder, and healthcare systems.

Resource Gaps Theme 1: The community is lacking adequate mental health and substance use treatment options, which disproportionately impacts unhoused and justice-involved people.

Participants described insufficient funding for mental health services at a state and local level as being related to the "revolving door" of homelessness and justice involvement in Missoula. There is also a substantial need for more local substance use treatment and medical detox programs; because of this gap, some people currently use the jail or ER to detox and access treatment. When someone is "booked and released" in jail without being evaluated and referred for mental health or substance use treatment, this can also contribute to a cycle of homelessness and justice involvement. Participants noted there is a particular gap in facilities and group homes that will house or treat people with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. In terms of options for safe shelter, unhoused people with disabilities or high medical needs are not allowed at the local low-barrier shelters if they cannot independently complete activities of daily living.

Resource Gaps Theme 2: No housing programs in Missoula are specifically aimed at housing people with justice involvement.

Participants were unaware of local housing resources dedicated specifically to people with criminal records or histories of incarceration. However, they noted that local permanent supportive housing projects, as well as residential treatment facilities and recovery centers, accept people with certain types of justice involvement (i.e., not violent or sexual offenders). These kinds of programs can offer short-term housing and treatment. The local housing authority also tries to place people with justice involvement in affordable housing units, with some exclusions such as people actively using substances and violent or sexual offenders.

Resource Gaps Theme 3: People with justice involvement need more support and case management for reentry, continuity of care from outside providers while incarcerated, and supportive transitional housing options.

Participants noted that maintaining contact and continuity of care with their clients who become incarcerated is challenging due to difficulty accessing clients in jail or uncertainty in how to do so. They felt that increased coordination with case managers in the courts and/or at the detention center could help maintain continuity of care. Participants also named a need for more case managers in the community in general, and specifically to work with people involved in the justice system. Upon reentry, people need extensive support to navigate services and access resources (e.g., reestablishing benefits, replacing lost IDs or legal documents). People exiting incarceration also need more options for recovery and transitional housing, as well as help finding longer term housing solutions.

Resource Gaps Theme 4: State and local housing and justice systems are not designed for Native American people or informed by Indigenous culture.

Participants felt strongly that state and local housing systems and policies are not rooted in Indigenous culture or ways of living, such as having intergenerational households and broad family systems or kinship networks. This can result in tensions and barriers to housing; for

example, many affordable housing options in Missoula cannot accommodate large, intergenerational households. State policies related to legal guardianship and definitions of family are often misaligned with Indigenous definitions of kinship in ways that can impact eligibility for housing benefits or have other legal consequences. Participants also noted that jails and prisons are dehumanizing and isolating, including for Native Americans, who are cut off from cultural practices and traditions while incarcerated.

Participants emphasized the need for more Native American leadership and staff in local first responder positions, the legal system, healthcare, and reentry programs. They also called for more peer support and community health workers who share cultural backgrounds and experiences with their clients. Some stressed the importance of addressing the local legacy of colonization by supporting Native-led programs and policies that specifically seek to redress historical harms and benefit Native people.

Spotlight on Current Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) Programs in Missoula

Although not intended to evaluate existing PSH programs, our interviews provided initial insights into their effectiveness in reducing justice involvement and homelessness. These findings can inform community organizations as they plan future PSH programs and expand housing options in Missoula.

PSH Theme 1: Reducing Police Interactions and Criminalized Behaviors.

Several participants reported that PSH programs like Blue Heron Place significantly reduce residents' interactions with law enforcement and the courts. Some felt that 24/7 staff availability has helped to de-escalate situations that otherwise might have resulted in police involvement. However, participants also identified a need for more highly trained staff and medical providers at local PSH programs. Residents are also still at risk of eviction from PSH for lease violations like smoking, substance use, or conflict with neighbors. Once evicted from PSH, individuals face limited housing options and may quickly become justice-involved again.

PSH Theme 2: Challenges in Transitioning from Homelessness to Housing

The transition into apartment-style housing presents challenges for people with chronic homelessness or prior justice involvement. Moving into housing may be isolating, with residents' community and friends from the shelters or streets unable to visit freely due to guest policies. Residents who are used to calling the police to resolve conflicts may struggle in close living quarters. Some individuals also lack independent living skills, such as cleaning and taking care of an apartment. Blue Heron Place specifically may not be well suited for people who need low-barrier housing (i.e., less paperwork-intensive processes, more leniency with lease violations, etc.) or intensive medical and mental health support. Participants felt Missoula could benefit from having more diverse models of PSH. As a new PSH program, participants also felt it was too early to assess the impact of Blue Heron Place on reducing justice involvement and achieving stable housing outcomes.

Summary

Missoula's current PSH programs show promise in reducing justice involvement among residents. However, housing stability can remain fragile for individuals, given that lease violations such as substance use, conflicts with neighbors, or other issues can lead to eviction. Some individuals, particularly those with severe mental health needs or active substance use, may not be well-served by the current PSH models. Expanding services, improving housing retention strategies, and developing diverse PSH models across Missoula could significantly improve the success and sustainability of these programs.

Youth Focused Findings

In this section, we highlight findings from the key informant interviews that are most relevant to youth in Missoula County who are experiencing housing insecurity and/or justice-involvement. Youth experiencing housing insecurity in Missoula face unique and complex barriers that intersect with justice involvement, resource limitations, and other systemic challenges. Housing barriers for young adults stem from their limited rental and credit history, lack of co-signers, and, in some cases, the justice involvement of their parents. While some youth-specific housing programs exist, participants emphasized the lack of safe emergency shelter options for young people and highlighted the need for more youth-centered housing solutions.

Youth Theme 1: Youth transitioning into young adulthood may "age out" of housing options or resources and struggle with the transition to adulthood.

Interview participants noted that a significant challenge for transition-aged youth is "aging out" of their group homes or foster care, or losing their housing upon becoming an adult without a next living situation lined up. Participants explained that transition-aged youth are going through multiple transitions at once in terms of navigating adulthood and learning the life skills needed for renting, such as maintaining a steady job/source of income, paying rent on time and budgeting, and interacting with landlords. Many do not have supportive adults in their life helping them build these skills or navigate challenging situations. They may not know what resources exist to help them or how to access such resources and need better support to connect with the resources available to adults.

Youth Theme 2: Homelessness as a young person can lead to justice involvement.

As with homelessness among older adults, participants noted that youth homelessness often leads to justice involvement because youth may engage in criminalized survival behaviors like theft, survival sex (i.e., exchanging sex for money or a place to stay), or selling substances. Youth may also be living with other young people, experimenting with substances, and attracting unwanted attention from neighbors or police. Once involved in the justice system, youth who cannot afford a private attorney may have worse case outcomes or face harsher sentencing than their more affluent peers.

Youth Theme 3: Unhoused or housing insecure youth are a "hidden" population and may move frequently.

Compared to older adults, participants felt youth and young adults facing housing insecurity are less likely to use homeless shelters or be visibly unhoused in the community. Instead, they often "couch surf" and stay with friends, families of friends, or extended family members. They may frequently move from house to house or move to different cities and states. Because of this, participants noted that they may not benefit as much from longer term housing support, such as housing vouchers. They are also difficult for service providers to find and serve.

Youth Theme 4: Housing barriers for young adults may be related to their age as well as their own or family members' justice involvement.

Young adults face unique housing barriers in that they have not yet had the opportunity to build credit or a rental history, yet they must still demonstrate these to potential landlords. Many vulnerable youths do not have adults with good credit or income to serve as co-signers; some service providers noted they have needed to offer double deposits for landlords to accept a

young person as a tenant. Those with past justice involvement may face additional barriers accessing housing vouchers or obtaining housing. Participants explained that having parents who are reentering from incarceration can also pose challenges. Young adults may try to support formerly incarcerated parents who are no longer eligible to receive housing vouchers by obtaining a voucher for themselves; however, the young person can face repercussions or lose their voucher if it is found out that the parent(s) are living with them.

Youth Theme 5: Missoula has some existing youth-specific housing resources but does not have a safe emergency shelter for young people.

Participants noted that there are some youth-specific housing resources, including the HUD Foster Youth to Independence housing vouchers for youth aging out of foster care. There is also a statewide HUD-funded Youth Homelessness Demonstration Project that provides case management and temporary housing support for unhoused youth. However, some participants noted there is inconsistency in the availability and dispersal of the youth housing vouchers. Several participants noted the need for safe emergency shelter options tailored for youth/young adults. They felt that existing shelters may be unsafe, especially for women, girls, and transgender individuals, or may be environments that promote substance use.

Key Takeaways from Community Insights on Barriers, Resources, and Gaps

People experiencing homelessness, especially those living unsheltered, face frequent criminalization and police contact. Interview participants consistently described how people experiencing homelessness are booked into jail for minor offenses like trespassing, failure to appear, or public intoxication that are intricately linked to being unhoused. This pattern was described as a "revolving door," with few opportunities to exit the cycle. Many participants emphasized that criminal charges often compound existing barriers to housing, employment, and services, further entrenching instability.

Justice-involved individuals face deep housing barriers tied to legal restrictions and stigma.

Individuals with criminal records, especially those with felonies, are frequently denied access to both public and private housing. Participants noted that some housing providers have blanket policies excluding applicants with any criminal history, regardless of the nature or timing of the offense. Even when legal restrictions do not apply, stigma from landlords, housing authorities, and community members often prevents justice-involved individuals from securing housing, particularly in a tight and competitive market.

Mental health, substance use, and trauma are core issues in both housing instability and justice involvement.

Participants described the co-occurrence of untreated mental health conditions, substance use, and trauma as a major driver of both homelessness and incarceration. Justice-involved individuals frequently return to the community without continuity of care, and many unhoused individuals cycle in and out of crisis without ever accessing consistent behavioral health support. Several providers emphasized the need for trauma-informed and person-centered services to disrupt this pattern.

Systems are not designed to meet people where they are.
Interview participants highlighted frustration with service systems that are inflexible, inaccessible, and often punitive. Paperwork-heavy processes, strict eligibility requirements, and rigid appointment-based models often exclude those with unstable housing or limited access to phones, internet, or transportation. Several participants described clients being removed from waitlists after missing mail or failing to check in regularly, which is especially problematic for those without a permanent address.

Native-led and culturally responsive services are limited but deeply needed.
Participants consistently named the lack of Native American-led programs as a major gap in Missoula's housing and justice systems. Many emphasized that existing programs often fail to align with Native values around kinship, healing, and community. The absence of culturally rooted resources makes it harder for Native American individuals to engage in services and reinforces the legacy of institutional distrust stemming from forced relocation, assimilation, and intergenerational trauma.

Young adults are especially vulnerable to falling through the cracks.
Youth and young adults, particularly those aging out of foster care or exiting unstable home environments, often experience homelessness for the first time during this transition period. Participants shared that many youths avoid shelters due to stigma or fear, and few services are tailored specifically for their needs. Without early intervention, these young people are at risk of long-term housing instability and eventual justice system involvement.

System silos and limited collaboration result in missed opportunities for prevention.
Participants described housing, health, and justice systems as operating largely in silos, with little coordination to support individuals across transitions such as jail release, hospital discharge, or aging out of youth services. This fragmentation results in gaps in care, duplicative processes, and missed opportunities for early intervention. Participants emphasized the need for cross-system collaboration and data-sharing to support long-term solutions and highlighted positive existing examples of collaboration, such as Shelter Court and Resource Access Days.

Perspectives of Impacted Communities: Housing Barriers & Needs

Youth Perspectives on Barriers to Housing and Shelter

We conducted a "community pop-up" at Willard Alternative High School and collected data from 20 student participants. Willard serves students seeking a non-traditional educational environment where students can be in smaller classes and have a supportive atmosphere to foster engagement and student success. To provide an alternative way of engaging older transition-aged youth who no longer attended school, we also partnered with a local youth services provider who works with youth in the foster care system and collected similar information via phone from an additional 17 young people.

Youth participants in the community pop-up event and phone interviews were between the ages of 16-25 (see Table 10 for participant characteristics), with most (73%) being 16 to 18 years old. Participants were each asked the same set of initial screening questions to learn about their experiences of foster care, housing insecurity, homelessness, and/or justice involvement. Over half (59%) had experienced homelessness at some point in their lives and over half (57%) had been in foster care. Almost all participants (89%) had at least one parent or close family member who were currently or formerly incarcerated. Almost one-third had been in jail or juvenile detention or had otherwise been justice-involved.

Table 10. Youth Community Pop-up Participant Characteristics (N = 37)

Characteristic	Total	Percent
Age	Mean = 17.8	-
Involved in foster care	21	57%
Ever experienced homelessness	22	59%
Ever been incarcerated	11	30%
Parents/family members ever been incarcerated	33	89%

Barriers to Stable Housing

Youth participants were provided with a list of potential barriers to stable housing, based on results from the key informant interviews, and asked which (if any) they or their family had been impacted by. Participants could "vote" for as many barriers as they wanted. Results are shown in Table 11 below.

Housing costs or financial barriers were the most frequently cited by far, with 33 participants (89%) indicating this was a barrier for them or their families. Participants noted that housing costs are prohibitive for them or their parents/family members, waitlists for housing vouchers are years long, and they struggle to afford deposits or meet income requirements. Some participants were able to access youth housing vouchers, noting that they would not be able to afford the rent without a voucher.

A sizeable number of participants reported that they did not want to live at home, in their foster home, or in a group home because they felt unsafe or unwelcome there. Almost all these

participants were currently or formerly involved in the foster system. Participants also faced age-related barriers, such as wanting to move out on their own but being too young to apply for housing and/or still being in the foster system. Other age-related barriers included having trouble securing housing because of their lack of rental history or credit as young adults. Some participants reported facing legal-related barriers such as not being able to return to their home or group home after leaving, having criminal charges that prevented them from being in a group home, or having other housing-related legal issues like evictions.

Table 11. Youth Barriers to Finding or Keeping a Stable Place to Live (N = 37)

Barrier to Stable Housing	Total	%	Description
Housing costs or finances	33	89%	• no places to live that fit their budget • can't afford the rent/deposit or meet income requirements • family members on waitlists for housing vouchers • could not afford the rent without a housing voucher
Don't want to live at home	14	38%	• feel unsafe or unwelcome at home, in foster home, or in group home
Age-related barriers	13	35%	• want to move out on their own, but too young to apply for own housing and/or still in foster system • landlords won't rent to them because of their age, lack of rental history, or lack of credit
Legal-related barriers	9	24%	• they or someone in their household has a criminal record, has been evicted, or otherwise faces legal barriers to housing • cannot return to home or group home due to legal issues from leaving the home or criminal charges
Housing needs and accessibility	3	8%	• need larger space to accommodate the number of people living there
Sobriety requirements	2	5%	• places they could live would require them to be sober or have strict drug or alcohol policies

Barriers to Temporary Safe Shelter

Youth participants were also provided with a list of potential barriers to finding temporary shelter or a safe place to stay during periods of homelessness (see Table 12). Some participants chose not to answer because they did not feel the question applied to them. Of those who answered, the most frequent barrier was not knowing where to go to seek shelter or support (20 participants). Several participants mentioned living with their parents in a vehicle or other temporary arrangements during periods of homelessness. Others said they were unaware of resources related to homelessness when they first became unhoused. Similarly, 15 participants expressed that they (or their parents) did not have family or friends to stay with when they needed it. In some cases, participants had been kicked out of their home and had to couch surf

or try to find temporary places to stay. Safety in shelters was also a barrier for several participants who reported feeling unsafe or experiencing abuse, discrimination, harassment, or neglect in these spaces. A few had been denied access to a temporary shelter due to their age, not meeting shelter requirements, or being kicked out of or trespassed from a shelter.

Table 12. Youth Barriers to Temporary Safe Shelter (N = 37)

Barrier to Temporary Shelter	Total	Description
Didn't know where to go	20	• don't know where to go if they need temporary shelter or help • were unhoused with a parent or family member who didn't know where to go • don't know of resources for youth facing homelessness
No family or friends to stay with	15	• didn't have any family or friends they could stay with when they needed it • kicked out of their home and had to couch surf
Feeling unsafe at shelters	12	• don't feel safe in temporary shelter spaces like the Poverello or Johnson Street shelters • experienced discrimination, abuse, or harassment at a shelter
Denied access to shelter	4	• denied access due to age • kicked out of shelter or didn't meet shelter requirements

Open-Ended Responses

Youth participants were also asked to provide open-ended responses to two questions. The first asked participants to reflect on what they see as the biggest problem for young people trying to find housing or shelter in Missoula. Housing costs were the most common theme in the open-ended responses, with over half of participants listing "cost," "affordability," or "price of rent" as the biggest problem. Participants also named the general cost of living and expenses as a problem, as well as difficulty finding and keeping stable jobs or having the "right kind of job" to be competitive in the housing market. Safety was seen as a key concern; several participants answered that "feeing safe" or "finding a safe place" were the biggest problems for young people. Other responses focused on age as a barrier (including lack of rental history or credit), housing waitlists, feeling comfortable and stable in housing, difficulty completing paperwork or obtaining legal documents, affordable housing options not being centrally located or near bus lines, and not knowing where to go or struggling to ask for help when in a state of survival.

The second question asked participants what they thought could help young people find a safe place to live and get the help they need. Many participants advocated for more support from trusted adults who could help them navigate housing and other resources. For example, participants' ideas included "hav[ing] someone to go to," "more support and help after school finding homes or a shelter," "having a person in schools to help find houses," and "having resources and people to talk to," such as peers who have had similar experiences. Participants

wanted information to be more readily available online, such as having a website where they could go to find housing and other resources. Many participants' responses also focused on the need for lower housing costs and more rental assistance or housing vouchers. Other participants felt having "stronger community" and "keep[ing] our town clean/safe" were important, as well as having more education about finance and job opportunities. Some also named specific tangible resources they needed, such as short-term housing options outside of shelters and access to drop-in showers and hygiene supplies.

Perspectives from Unhoused Adults on Barriers to Housing and Shelter

We conducted a second "community pop-up" at the Johnson Street Emergency Shelter during Shelter Court and collected data from 24 participants. Shelter Court is a monthly event hosted by staff from the Missoula Municipal Court to provide an opportunity for unhoused people with misdemeanors to appear via Zoom in front of a judge. Participants in the community pop-up event were between the ages of 28 and 79 years old (median age = 47.5). Participants were asked initial screening questions to learn about their current living situation and current or past justice involvement. Almost all participants were staying at the Johnson Street shelter; a few were living unsheltered. All 24 participants had been incarcerated at some point in their lives. Half of participants stated they had been in jail or prison at some point within the past year. Other participants 'most recent period of incarceration varied widely, including a few participants who had last been incarcerated over 10 years ago.

Barriers to Stable Housing

As with the youth, participants at Shelter Court were given a list of potential barriers to housing based on results from the key informant interviews and voted for which ones they had been impacted by (see Table 13). Most participants (83%) named housing costs as a barrier. For many, this was coupled with long waitlists for housing vouchers. Some participants had applied and waited for housing vouchers multiple times after having lost their place on the wait list for various reasons, such as not having a phone or mailing address or due to a period of incarceration.

Over half of participants (58%) named medical or mental health needs as a barrier to being stably housed. Participants explained that their mental health conditions made it hard to maintain housing due to symptoms like paranoia or behaviors that resulted in interpersonal conflicts with neighbors. Some noted that supportive housing and group home options are limited for people with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders or those with multiple diagnoses. Some also described having difficulty accessing the VA or other needed medical/mental health services because of their felony history, which in turn impacted their ability to find and maintain housing. Similarly, some participants struggled to access substance use treatment because of their criminal history.

Involvement in the justice system was seen as a barrier by participants, both in terms of reentering from incarceration without anywhere to stay and longer-term impacts of trying to find housing with a criminal record. Participants noted that most landlords or property managers conduct background checks, and their criminal history made it hard to compete for housing. Some were on the violent offender registry or had felony convictions, making housing even more difficult to find.

Table 13. Barriers to Housing for Unhoused, Justice-involved Individuals (N = 24)

Barrier to Stable Housing	Total	%	Description
Housing costs or finances	20	83%	• no places to live that fit their budget • can't afford the rent/deposit or meet income requirements • Social Security isn't enough to cover rent
Housing applications or waitlists	14	58%	• waitlists for housing vouchers are years long • lack of information about where they are on the waitlist • can lose spot on voucher waitlist due to lack of phone or mailing address
Medical or mental health needs	14	58%	• mental health makes it hard to maintain housing • hard to find supportive housing or group homes for co-occurring disorders/multiple diagnoses • difficulty accessing VA or mental health services because of felony history
Legal-related barriers	11	46%	• have a criminal history or are on the violent offender registry • most landlords or property managers conduct background checks
Reentry after incarceration	10	42%	• released from jail or prison without anywhere to live • being on probation or parole limited housing options
Substance use	9	38%	• difficulty accessing substance use treatment because of criminal history • substance use results in jail time or misdemeanors

Barriers to Temporary Safe Shelter

Participants were also provided with a list of potential challenges to finding temporary shelter or a safe place to stay (see Table 14). Most participants (75%) noted that they did not have any family or friends to stay with, so they needed to use temporary shelters like the Johnson Street Shelter or try to find somewhere else to stay like a vehicle. Over half of participants reported feeling unsafe at shelters and were particularly worried about theft of their personal belongings. However, many participants also were not sure where else they could go outside of the Poverello or Johnson Street shelters. Some reported not knowing where they were allowed to camp due to new policies restricting camping in public parks, while others had vehicles or trailers to live in but did not know where to park them. Nine participants reported having been put on a temporary 'out' from one of the local shelters.

Table 14. Barriers to Shelter for Unhoused, Justice-involved Individuals (N = 24)

Barrier to Temporary Shelter	Total	%	Description
No family or friends to stay with	18	75%	• no family or friends to stay with when needed • don't want to be a burden to friends or family
Feeling unsafe at shelters	15	63%	• don't feel safe in temporary shelter spaces • theft of personal belongings
Don't know where to go	15	63%	• don't know where they're allowed to camp or sleep under new camping policies • have a car or trailer to stay in, but don't know where to park it
Denied access to shelter	9	38%	• have been put on a temporary 'out' from the local shelters
Something else	4	17%	• no room in local shelters • needing places to eat • lack of places where they are allowed to camp • having a dual diagnosis (MH and substance use)

Open-Ended Responses

As with youth, participants at Shelter Court were also asked to provide open-ended responses to two questions. The first asked participants to reflect on what they see as the biggest problem for people trying to find housing or shelter in Missoula. The most common answers were related to the cost of housing, deposits, and living expenses. One participant summarized this as "finding the resources for help to come up with the costs incurred upon entry (i.e., deposit for apartment, lights, water, garbage, or all furniture and items needed)." Participants also described rental history and credit as barriers for people seeking housing, as well as waitlists for housing vouchers and the "red tape to just get into [a] place."

Several participants felt the biggest problem facing people trying to find housing was discrimination due to being unhoused and/or having a mental illness. A participant described this as "discrimination and/or prejudice[d] outlooks towards home/houseless individuals, regardless of individual characteristics." Some saw mental health and substance use as the biggest problems facing unhoused Missoulians. Others answered, "no help" or "not knowing where or who to go to for help." Two participants focused on problems related to finding safe, temporary shelter, including not being able to leave the shelter because their belongings would be stolen or thrown away by staff and experiencing harassment by the police.

The second question asked participants what they thought could help people like them find housing and get the support they need. Participants' responses varied, with no one theme standing out as most prevalent. Several touched on needing more resources and supports, such as having mental health and substance use services on site at the shelters, providing educational resources and outreach to unhoused people, or "more programs through the shelters that help and encourage changes to their situations." A participant emphasized the

need for consistency in supports and resources, noting that "not being consistent isn't breaking the barrier."

Several participants focused on financial needs and housing costs, such as lowering rent costs or having access to employment or social security/disability benefits. Others described ways to address systemic housing barriers, like not doing background checks on housing applications for nonviolent offenses, not requiring credit checks, and doing more outreach before removing people from the housing voucher waitlist.

A notable theme was around the need for more acceptance of unhoused people in the community. One participant felt that "a more accepting community" would help unhoused people find the support they needed; another asked simply to be left alone and for the city to stop "changing the rules." Another participant noted, "People at the shelter who've been here long term are looking for a commune type living where we are all living together – some people are lonely." Finally, some participants appealed to their faith or prayer for support and hope.

Key Takeaways from Impacted Communities on Barriers to Housing and Shelter

High housing costs are a primary barrier to stable housing across both youth and adult populations.
Community pop-up participants consistently identified the cost of rent, deposits, and income requirements as major obstacles. Many individuals experiencing homelessness or justice involvement lacked steady income or employment, making it difficult to qualify for housing. Additionally, housing vouchers were viewed as difficult to access due to long waitlists, eligibility restrictions, and complex application processes.

Youth face unique barriers related to age, safety, and lack of information or adult support.
Participants noted that they face additional barriers to housing as young adults, including a lack of rental history or credit, not having adults to act as co-signers, and not being sure where to go for information or support. Many young people described feeling unsafe or unwelcome in their foster homes or group homes. They were unaware of resources tailored to the needs of unhoused youth and did not feel comfortable or safe using existing temporary shelters. Youth emphasized the importance of having trusted adults and accessible information about housing services.

Among older unhoused adults with justice involvement, medical and mental health needs are often a barrier to housing.
Community pop-up participants reported struggling to find supportive housing or group homes for co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders or multiple diagnoses. Participants felt having more consistent services and support persons on-site in the Johnson Street Shelter or other low-barrier shelters would help with access to housing and other needed resources.

Criminal records can pose lifelong barriers to securing housing and necessary services.
Participants explained that having a criminal record, particularly for violent offenses and/or felonies, disqualified them from many affordable housing resources. They struggled to find

housing on the private market because most landlords conduct criminal background checks. They also had difficulty accessing services and benefits, such as Veteran's Affairs or substance use treatment, due to past felony or other criminal convictions.

Finding temporary shelter and places to stay unsheltered is a challenge due to changing city policies and feeling unwelcome in the community.
Participants who had vehicles or who preferred to live unsheltered due to the challenging conditions and safety/theft concerns in congregate shelters stated they were unsure where they were legally allowed to camp or park. Participants also described feeling unaccepted by the Missoula community and were frustrated by changing policies.

Study Limitations

While our study offers valuable insights into homelessness and justice involvement in Missoula County, several factors may limit the reliability and accuracy of the findings.

Missoula County Detention Facility (MCDF) Data:
Data from the MCDF should be interpreted with caution. Bookings are reported by individual officers, which may lead to inconsistencies. This is especially the case for race, as it is unclear whether this was self-reported by individuals or assumed by officers. We categorized individuals as "unhoused" if they lacked a physical address or listed a public location (e.g., a bus stop). However, this may have included housed individuals who did not provide an address at the time of their booking. We also removed duplicate bookings from the same individuals (except where noted) to prevent overcounting in demographic analyses. As such, these results should not be compared to future MCDF analyses that do not de-duplicate individuals.

Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) Data:
The HMIS likely underrepresents unhoused individuals who do not seek services, particularly youth and those disconnected from formal systems. Additionally, questions about recent police or jail interactions had substantial missing data; we have only presented findings for the subset of individuals who responses, so results should be interpreted with caution.

Demographic Data Inconsistencies:
Race, ethnicity, and gender are socially constructed and vary across cultures and contexts. These identities were measured inconsistently across data sources (i.e., HMIS, MCDF, and the Census). For example, HMIS allows for self-identified gender, whereas MCDF uses officer-reported sex (male/female). These inconsistencies limited our ability to analyze data for certain groups, such as transgender individuals or people identifying as multiracial.

Qualitative Interview and Community Pop-up Data:
To protect participant confidentiality given Missoula's small professional community, we did not collect demographic information during interviews with service providers. Some individuals and organizations did not respond to interview requests, and their perspectives may differ from those reflected in the report. Community pop-up events with people impacted by homelessness and justice involvement also had limitations. Participants voted on pre-defined barriers to housing based on themes from earlier interviews. Although a "something else" option was included, additional or alternative barriers may not have been captured. In addition, holding more community pop-ups in different locations might have reached a broader sample. Our events potentially missed impacted individuals who are not accessing shelters, such as those who are couch surfing or in transitional housing.

Recommendations

In this section, we summarize existing programs and policies in Missoula that align with evidence-based strategies to reduce homelessness and justice involvement among residents. We also provide several recommendations for policy and programs that could help to reduce housing barriers for justice-involved individuals. These recommendations are informed by research on effective strategies for combatting homelessness and justice involvement, as well as solutions recommended by participants in our study.

Existing Evidence-Based Strategies in Missoula

Disrupting cycles of homelessness and justice involvement requires a combination of housing-first strategies, diversion programs, supportive services, and policy changes. Missoula has already implemented several programs and policies that align with suggested or evidence-based strategies to address homelessness and justice involvement,[1] including:

- **Coordinated Entry and Data Sharing:** Using data-driven approaches to track individuals who are unhoused and involved in the justice system to better align services and ensure people with the highest needs are prioritized for housing and services.[27]

  Examples: Missoula Coordinated Entry System/Homeless Management Information System

- **Specialized Homeless Court Programs:** Alternative court systems that collaborate with shelters to remove barriers and resolve legal issues for unhoused people while removing punitive or coercive outcomes like fines or jail time.[28]

  Examples: Shelter Court

- **Jail Diversion and Crisis Intervention:** Reducing justice involvement by redirecting individuals away from arrest or prosecution and into community-based services like crisis support, mental health care, or substance use treatment.[29,30]

  Examples: Missoula Crisis Intervention Team, Missoula Mobile Support Team, Missoula County Calibrate pretrial diversion program, Missoula County Jail Diversion Master Plan

- **Faith-Based & Nonprofit Programs:** Faith-based and nonprofit organizations can provide temporary shelter, reentry housing, mentoring, and employment assistance for individuals exiting the justice system and/or experiencing homelessness.[31,32]

  Examples: Missoula Interfaith Collaborative/Housing Advocate Network, Hope Rescue Mission/Temporary Safe Outdoor Space (TSOS)

- **Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH):** Providing subsidized stable housing with wraparound support, such as mental health care and substance use treatment.[33]

  Examples: Blue Heron Place

[1] Examples are based on information provided by interview participants and are not an exhaustive list of all programs or services currently available in the Missoula area.

Recommendations for Additional Programs, Policies, & Services

To support existing efforts and address current resource gaps, Missoula area stakeholders could consider policies, programs, and services that focus specifically on housing for justice-involved individuals and transition-aged youth. Key evidence-based strategies that were raised by key informants and/or community pop-up participants include:

1. Housing First as a Guiding Evidence Based Model

Many key informants discussed the need to use a "Housing First" model to reduce homelessness and justice involvement. The Housing First model is an approach to addressing homelessness that prioritizes providing individuals with permanent, stable housing without preconditions such as sobriety or participation in treatment programs.[34] Once housed, individuals are offered supportive services, such as mental health care or substance use treatment, but these services are voluntary. Empirical evidence consistently supports Housing First's effectiveness, with studies in the U.S. and Canada demonstrating that when implemented with fidelity to the model, Housing First leads to higher housing retention rates, improved mental health, reduced substance use, fewer shelter stays, and reductions in both police interactions and jail stays.[34–36] Housing First models have been shown to be both cost-effective and successful in improving long-term stability for people experiencing homelessness.[35,36] Key informants noted that many programs and service providers in Missoula strive to take a Housing First approach, but that resources to fully implement this model are often lacking or may conflict with the perspectives of other collaborators.

Key informants also emphasized the importance of involving people with lived experience of homelessness and justice involvement in such efforts and letting their input drive policies and services. Housing programs may be more effective when they are directly informed by their clients, who can provide valuable insights into the specific challenges they face and help to create services that are more accessible, relevant, and tailored to the needs of individuals.

> *"Of course, housing first is important… but the resources to do that in a robust, fully best practice to fidelity way right now is challenging."* – *Service Provider*

2. Transitional Housing for Justice-Involved Individuals

Transitional housing for people exiting the justice system was cited by numerous key informants as a key resource gap in the Missoula area. Examples of transitional housing that have been shown to be effective in reducing homelessness among justice-involved individuals include reentry housing programs (e.g., halfway houses) that offer case management, job training, and support for substance use disorders.[37] Similarly, some jurisdictions have dedicated housing for people on parole or probation and may partner with probation offices to ensure parolees and probationers have stable housing upon reentry. Additional sober living options are also needed for individuals in recovery, especially for people with violent or sexual offenses who may be excluded from existing sober living options.

"I think some of the money that is going toward building prisons needs to be looked at as diverting to communities so that communities can establish recovery homes for people who can thrive in the community while they are being supported in their recovery efforts." – *Service Provider*

"I wish that we could have sober living, where there's counseling available and stuff, just in that transitional period. I wish that piece, where people are coming back into the community, felt less punitive and was less separated from everyone else because it still looks punitive from the inside and the outside." - *Service Provider*

3. Reentry Housing, Case Management, and Peer Support Programs

Our results suggest a need for more robust jail and prison reentry programs in Missoula to support individuals' reintegration into the community. Housing vouchers for reentry can directly assist with securing private-market housing, as recent federal administrations have encouraged public housing authorities to make these available to formerly incarcerated individuals.[38] These vouchers are most effective when combined with case management and wraparound services for employment, addiction recovery, and reintegration.[39] Key informants highlighted the importance of starting case management during incarceration, given that housing resources can take years to secure. In addition to case management, peer support and mentorship programs during reentry can help reduce recidivism, connect individuals to services, increase engagement, and combat stigma.[40,41] Key informants stressed the value of peer support from individuals with similar backgrounds, especially for Native Americans and other minoritized groups in Missoula.

"But also starting working with folks while they're incarcerated would go a long ways and not waiting to catch them once they're released. These processes take years sometimes, and why can't they start waiting that out while they're doing their time?" – *Service Provider*

"I do think that peer support level, that there isn't a lot of that support that I've been able to find in the community. So if we could try to find some more of those community health workers, peer support, people with lived experiences, all can tend to find a better way to support those like them." – *Service Provider*

4. Rapid Rehousing and Transitional Housing for Young Adults

Key informants and youth participants in the community pop-up emphasized the need for youth-focused transitional housing and shelter in Missoula. Youth-specific policies that have been shown to be supportive for transition-aged youth in other states include extended foster care, in which youth over 18 can continue to receive support from the foster care system through age 23.[12] Other innovative housing solutions for this population include master leasing models in which an agency or non-profit maintains a master lease on transitional apartment

units that can be used for rapid rehousing of transition-aged youth. Rapid rehousing involves short term (one to two year) rental subsidies coupled with supportive services and has been shown to shorten periods of homelessness and decrease criminal justice involvement, employment challenges, and substance use.[42]

Key informants emphasized the need for low-barrier housing in which young people can "practice" renting with more leeway on lease violations than in traditional housing. Other promising interventions include Indigenous-led housing initiatives that support transition-aged youth, such as the Omamoo Wango Gamik program in Edmonton, Canada, which provides a culturally grounded, multi-generational housing community for Indigenous youth exiting foster care and young parents whose children are at risk of removal by Child and Family Services.

> *"Some communities have a master leasing model… where an agency will maybe master lease a building... That way they have a way to easily transition people out of foster care or out of houselessness into these units for a period of time while they get their feet on the ground…" – Service Provider*

> *"First of all, there's not options for [transition-aged youth]. And then when you find options and you get them all set up, they've never experienced this, so they fail, because they don't know how to budget, or they don't understand, oh, when you say don't have a dog, you really mean it… And so, I think that if there was a space for them to come and live and have that opportunity to practice with reasonable rental expectations…" – Service Provider*

5. Tailored and Supportive Shelter Alternatives

Many key informants shared their desire for additional temporary shelter options, especially small, individual shelters like the existing Temporary Safe Outdoor Space. Although not a long-term housing solution, temporary options like tiny home villages or pallet shelters can help unhoused individuals transition into housing while exercising autonomy, gaining skills for independent living, and providing an alternative to congregate shelters.[43] Tiny homes or pallet shelters could potentially also address concerns about theft expressed by people living at the Johnson Street Emergency Shelter by giving them a secure place to keep their personal belongings.

> *"The TSOS camp actually has had a lot of success too as a transitional place, but it's, I think, a lot to do with just how it's structured… It's like little private dwellings... I've read about a lot of these other tiny home villages in other cities that have been really successful." -Service Provider*

> *"I also really like the idea of the pallet shelters, but doing it in a way that again, isn't about surveillance or monitoring them, it's really, it feels more like those people have agency and control and direction over their lives. I would really love to see that." – Service Provider*

In addition to transitional housing and innovative autonomous shelter options, key informants and participants in the community pop-ups highlighted the need for shelters tailored to specific age groups or demographics, such as young people, seniors, or women. Research has shown that youth-specific shelters may be more acceptable to young people and reduce barriers to utilizing shelter when needed.[44] Similarly, studies indicate that senior-specific shelters with integrated healthcare services can significantly improve physical and mental health outcomes for older adults experiencing homelessness, and are more likely to result in seniors transitioning out of homelessness into long term supportive housing options.[45]

> *"If you think of the 70-year-old man who's just entered homelessness, is struggling to maintain his cool with a 22-year-old kid who's struggling with a meth addiction, that's a really challenging relationship dynamic for any staff to manage. And for that to escalate and turn into a bigger deal is where someone ends up getting kicked out and losing access to services. Whereas if there were a youth or an elderly or even more [gender-]specific shelter options, I think we would reduce those kinds of interactions."* –Service Provider

6. Addressing Stigma and Fostering Inclusion in the Community

Our study emphasizes the need to address stigma toward people experiencing homelessness and justice involvement. Unhoused individuals at our community pop-up expressed a strong desire for greater acceptance in Missoula, and key informants noted that both unhoused and justice-involved individuals face discrimination. Prior research has found that homelessness stigma is related to negative health and mental health outcomes for unhoused individuals, as well as greater avoidance of services.[46] Community-wide interventions are necessary to destigmatize homelessness and educate the public on its root causes, including trauma, poverty, and systemic inequities. Organizations and officials can help reduce stigma by providing platforms for people who have experienced homelessness and justice involvement to share their stories and challenge stereotypes. Community engagement through civic groups and faith-based organizations can foster inclusion by creating spaces for meaningful interactions between housed and unhoused community members, such as community meals or art projects.

Key informants also highlighted the importance of educating landlords and employers to break down stigma and barriers to renting or hiring formerly incarcerated or unhoused individuals. This could involve teaching landlords about the benefits of renting to housing voucher holders or those in reentry programs, as well as providing incentives and education to employers to encourage hiring formerly incarcerated people. Some informants suggested social enterprise ventures and cooperative employment models, like Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, which provides meaningful employment and reentry support for formerly incarcerated individuals. Social enterprise ventures have been shown to be successful in supporting economic self-sufficiency, increasing stability of housing, and substantially reducing recidivism rates for formerly incarcerated individuals.[47,48]

> *"There needs to be a plan so that when people see poverty [in our community], their first reaction isn't fear. That they can go to decision makers and be like, 'It's just really scary to*

see someone who's poor.' They're not going to say it like that. They're going to say, 'My kid was really scared.' 'I can't even use the park anymore.' … All of these agencies have to be working to break down the harmful narratives." – Service Provider

"I guess I would just like to see more education available for landlords, and people who work in the housing industry. More education about recovery processes, and the realities that many people returning from incarceration or many people who are justice-involved are fine upstanding citizens and can thrive in the community if they're supported." – Service Provider

7. Culturally Responsive Services and Addressing Legacies of Colonialism

Key informants stressed the need for culturally responsive services to support Native Americans, who are disproportionately represented in the city's unhoused and justice-involved populations. Key informants acknowledged that most service providers in Missoula are White or non-Native and discussed the need for cultural competency training. They noted that this should be coupled with efforts to recruit providers who share clients' cultural backgrounds. Research shows that culturally tailored justice, health, mental health, and substance use services for Native Americans can address historical trauma and systemic discrimination, promote collective healing, improve service engagement, and foster trust.[20,49–51] On the Flathead Reservation, the CSKT Tribal Defender's Office has implemented a "holistic defense" model that aligns closely with traditional tribal justice systems by seeking to view individuals holistically, address underlying factors such as poverty, mental health, and substance use that may be connected to their justice involvement, and connect them with needed social supports.[20] Missoula County could consider collaborating more closely with the CSKT Tribal Defender's Office to learn from and implement a similar approach in Missoula.

"One of the common requests that we get is for some sort of ceremony or prayer or some cultural practices to be offered to [Native American individuals] while they're in jail. They can really feel isolated and separated from not just their home but who they are." – Service Provider

"Connection and belonging is huge… And so having that kind of diverse representation and staffing that is reflective of who is in the setting is really important to help build that sense of trust." – Service Provider

Some key informants advocated for Native-led reparative housing and land restitution initiatives to address the displacement of Missoula's Indigenous peoples. Tribal-led land restitution campaigns have expanded across Montana and the US; for example, the Blackfeet Nation has worked to reclaim and manage their lands, and in 2022, full ownership and management of the CSKT Bison Range was restored to the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes. Tribal-settler partnerships outside of Montana have also shown promise, with some specifically benefitting urban Indian communities. For example, the Sogorea Te' Land Trust

works to rematriate[2] Indigenous land in the San Francisco Bay Area. In Missoula, similar efforts could address housing instability and justice involvement through community land trusts or other approaches that support the urban Indian community through reparative justice and self-determination.

> *"I think we literally just need to reckon with the inequality and inequity that's been gifted down to us. So we need options that actually address that, programs that directly and only benefit Native renters and buyers, but also meet them where they're at in terms of health issues that are also a direct result of the colonization. I think it all has to do with reparations and that you can't just steal basically everything from a people, keep them on the land, and then not give them enough to thrive." – Service Provider*

8. Policy & Advocacy Efforts

In addition to the services and recommendations outlined above, local policy and advocacy efforts are essential for system-level change. For example, "ban the box" policies that prohibit employers from asking job applicants about their criminal history on initial job applications can reduce discrimination against formerly incarcerated individuals.[52] Decriminalizing homelessness is also crucial, as substantial evidence indicates that criminalizing survival activities engaged in by unhoused people, like sleeping outside, worsens homelessness and justice involvement.[53,54] Key informants noted that recent city ordinances criminalizing sleeping or camping in public parks and other areas contribute to confusion, stigma, service disruption, and justice involvement for unhoused individuals. To break the cycle of homelessness and justice involvement, policymakers and service providers should consider decriminalization, fair opportunities, and culturally responsive solutions that address the root causes of inequality and support long-term stability.

> *"With the recent city ordinance that was just passed, they chose to move it from a civil matter into a misdemeanor. So now, people just trying to survive outdoors are being charged with misdemeanors… The amount of time and effort and money that goes into developing those ordinances and the policies around it and enforcing it? You wonder how many people could actually be housed with those same resources." – Service Provider*

> *"With this ordinance around…not camping in city parks and whatnot. I mean, I see those signs all over the place… I think it just contributes to the stigma when we say, 'You can't be anywhere. We just don't want to see you. We don't care that you're unhoused. We just don't want it to be visible.' And so I think legislation at that policy level, whether it's here in Missoula County or at the Montana level, I think absolutely needs to be done from a coordinated effort so those sorts of things are less likely to happen…" – Service Provider*

[2] Rematriation is a term developed by Indigenous women that refers to reconnecting with traditional lands, cultural practices, and ways of knowing as a form of resistance to colonial and patriarchal systems.

Conclusion

The findings from this needs assessment clearly illustrate a complex and deeply interconnected relationship between housing insecurity and justice system involvement in Missoula County. Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed patterns that underscore the ways these systems often reinforce one another, making it difficult for individuals to achieve long-term stability.

A Revolving Door Between Jail and Homelessness

Booking data from the Missoula County Detention Facility and service entry data from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) show that nearly 1 in 10 individuals entering the city's coordinated entry system had recently been released from jail, prison, or another institutional setting. At the same time, nearly 1 in 5 individuals booked into the county jail in 2023 were unhoused or had no address listed. Interview participants described a "revolving door" in which people are released from incarceration into homelessness, only to be re-arrested for minor infractions often related to being unhoused, such as trespassing, public intoxication, or failure to appear in court. These dynamics point to the urgent need for housing and reentry strategies that interrupt this cycle.

Co-Occurrence of Behavioral Health Needs and Housing Instability

Demographic data also reveal a high prevalence of mental health challenges and histories of trauma among individuals experiencing homelessness. Sixteen percent of individuals in the HMIS database reported a mental health disorder, and 7% reported experiencing domestic violence, with these numbers likely being underestimates of actual prevalence given reporting limitations. Interviews and community pop-ups affirmed that mental health needs, substance use, and trauma frequently intersect with housing insecurity and often go unaddressed, especially when individuals cycle between jail, the streets, and short-term shelter settings. Without access to stable housing and consistent care, behavioral health conditions are exacerbated, increasing the likelihood of justice system involvement and continued housing instability.

Disproportionate Impacts on Native Americans and Youth

Native American individuals make up approximately 2% of the Missoula County population but accounted for nearly 15% of unhoused people and 25% of jail bookings in the county among unhoused individuals. These disparities are deeply rooted in the region's history of land dispossession, cultural suppression, and structural racism. Youth were another population of concern: young people aged 17–24 accounted for 10% of those entering homelessness services and a notable portion of jail bookings among unhoused individuals. Interviews and community pop-ups indicated that youth who are aging out of foster care, disconnected from support systems, or struggling to navigate adult services without family or guidance are particularly at risk for housing instability and early justice involvement.

System Barriers that Perpetuate the Cycle

Across the board, justice-involved individuals face multiple, overlapping barriers to securing stable housing: criminal records that disqualify them from rentals or housing programs, lack of ID or income upon release, and long waitlists for housing assistance. For those with behavioral

health needs, these barriers are compounded by a fragmented system of care and a lack of treatment options, especially for individuals with co-occurring conditions. For Native American individuals, state and local systems that are misaligned with Indigenous cultural values and family structures further limit access to services. Community partners described how even well-intentioned systems often fail to meet people where they are, instead requiring complex processes, strict eligibility criteria, and siloed services that inadvertently exclude those who need support most.

Together, the demographic data and community insights tell a coherent and urgent story: people experiencing housing insecurity, especially those with behavioral health needs, prior justice involvement, or belonging to marginalized communities, face systemic barriers that increase their likelihood of incarceration. Once involved in the justice system, they face further obstacles to housing, treatment, and stability. This cycle is not inevitable, but it is deeply entrenched. Understanding who is affected and why is a first step toward designing housing interventions that are coordinated, culturally grounded, and responsive to the full scope of Missoula community members' needs.

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Appendix A: Methods

Demographic Overview: Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

Data Sources and Description of Datasets

We drew on two primary sources of administrative data to identify the demographics and circumstances of individuals who are unhoused and justice-involved: (1) Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) data provided through the Missoula Coordinated Entry System and (2) booking incidents from the Missoula County Detention Facility (MCDF) combined with court appointments data maintained by county law enforcement.

The HMIS database offers real-time data about individuals who are unhoused or struggle to obtain and maintain housing. This database includes information on demographics (e.g., age, sex, race/ethnicity), dates of entry into and exit out of the Missoula Coordinated Entry System, housing status, jail history, and other important social indicators of unhoused/housing insecure populations.

Yearly individual level and incident level booking charges from the MCDF include demographics, booking charge description, degree (e.g., misdemeanor or felony), and status of charges (e.g., released, incarcerated, pretrial, or sentenced). For this study, we included individuals who (1) had been booked into the county jail and (2) were listed as unhoused or not having a permanent address at the time of their booking. We explored data for the years 2018-2024. We specifically focus on the year 2023 for our analysis to reflect post-COVID trends in homelessness and justice involvement. At the time of analysis, booking incidents were not yet available for December 2024 and thus do not provide a complete picture of yearly bookings for 2024. In addition to data retrieved from the HMIS and MCDF through community partners, we used total city and population estimates drawn from the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey (ACS).[10] Additional population-level data on the age, sex, and racial/ethnic demographics of Missoula's city and county populations were also gathered from the ACS. We were unable to retrieve the population census of unhoused people for Missoula city/county from the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Point-In-Time population check of local shelters (this data was only publicly available at the state level).

Data Cleaning and Analysis

Datasets from Missoula's HMIS and MCDF were imported into STATA/SE 18, a statistical software system used for quantitative statistical analysis. The data was initially reviewed for duplicates and missing data points. Cases with missing data were dropped from the data set, then the data format was standardized.

We stratified the data based by demographic characteristics, including age, sex, and race/ethnicity, and calculated descriptives statistics for these subgroups. Racial and ethnic classifications were applied to individuals in both the HMIS and MCDF databases, following U.S. Census standards.[55,56] We included five racial categories across both Hispanic and non-Hispanic groups. Individuals who reported one race in the HMIS and MCDF databases were classified as Native American (including Alaskan Native or Indigenous), African American or Black, White,

and Other. This combined category included individuals reported as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and Middle Eastern, as each group comprised a small proportion of the population of the dataset and broader Missoula population.

Hispanic or Latino individuals who reported one race were categorized as both Hispanic or Latino and as a member of that racial groups, except in the case of White individuals. We classified individuals as White only if they were reported as non-Hispanic, White. Individuals reporting two or more races were classified as Multiracial.

Quantitative Measures

Homeless Management Information System Data

We utilized existing data from the HMIS database to identify the total number and percentage of youth and adults who entered the Missoula Coordinated Entry System and reported experiencing homelessness and/or housing insecurity from the years 2022 through 2024. We also captured the demographics and social indicators of these individuals. Demographic indicators included age, sex, and race/ethnicity. Social indicators included an individual's prior living situation, employment history and current job status, housing and rental history, history of receiving housing subsidies or vouchers, reported mental health issues, substance use disorders, physical disability, veteran status, and criminal justice history.

Our analysis focused on descriptive statistics (i.e., summary measures that described the dataset, including totals and percentages) of the population within the Missoula Coordinated Entry System (see Table A1, Description of Measures and Data Sources). We also compared percentages among unhoused individuals to percentages of the total population of the city of Missoula for indicators of age, sex, and race/ethnicity.

Missoula County Detention Facility Data

We utilized individual level and incident level data on jail booking charges from the MCDF database. We also included 5-year estimates (2019-2023) for the population from the ACS's Demographic and Housing Estimates (DP05: Census Bureau Table) and Sex and Age (S0101: Age and Sex - Census Bureau Table) to compare against the booking data.

We used 5-year population estimates to compare the age, sex, and racial representation of individuals in the Missoula population against the make-up of individuals identified as unhoused who were booked in the county jail.

We calculated the percentages of individuals who were unhoused and booked into the county jail by age, sex, and race/ethnicity, as well as the percentage of booking incidents by the types of booking charges. We used the charge description field included in the dataset to create an indicator for the types of offenses people were charged with and followed federal classification procedures from the FBI's National Incident Based Reporting System. For individual level bookings, we created an indicator to capture duplicates of individuals with multiple charges in a year.

Table A1. Description of Measures and Data Sources

Indicator Description	Data Source
Demographics and housing estimates, including the age, sex, and race/ethnicity for the city and county of Missoula	U.S. Census Bureau (American Community Survey)
Total # and percentage of unhoused and housing insecure individuals by age, sex, and race and ethnicity	Homeless Information Management System
Total # and percentage of unhoused and housing insecure individuals reporting domestic violence, mental health, and/or substance use	Homeless Information Management System
Total # and percentage of unhoused and housing insecure individuals by living situation prior to entry in the coordinated entry system (i.e., most recent period of homelessness)	Homeless Information Management System
Total # and percentage of unhoused and housing insecure individuals who reported interactions with police, arrest, or incarceration in the past 6 months	Homeless Information Management System
Total # of individuals per year; the proportion (percent) of individuals who are booked by housing status	Missoula County Detention Facility
Total # and percentage of yearly bookings for individuals who were unhoused by sex, race/ethnicity, and age	Missoula County Detention Facility
Total # of booking incidents for 2023; the proportion (percent) of incidents by type of booking charge	Missoula County Detention Facility
Total # and percentage of individuals who were booked for failure to appear among unhoused individuals by age, sex, and race and ethnicity	Missoula County Detention Facility

Community Insights: Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Purpose and Approach

We selected qualitative key informant interviews with local service providers and stakeholders as an appropriate method to assess the community landscape regarding homelessness and justice involvement. We sought to interview providers and stakeholders who had direct experience working with unhoused and justice-involved individuals, as well as those who could provide a systems perspective on current resources. Whereas quantitative data could tell us *who* in Missoula has been impacted by homelessness and justice involvement, the aim of the key informant interviews was to understand *why* these patterns were occurring, gather examples to illustrate the patterns, and identify key barriers and resource gaps.

Sample and Recruitment

We used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. We worked with our community partners to generate a list of service providers and other key stakeholders related to the intersection of housing and criminal justice. We included frontline service providers, program managers, and administrators to capture a range of perspectives. We also identified potential participants through snowball sampling, in which we asked study participants at the end of their interviews to identify other people in their network who they thought would be a good fit for the study. Interviews continued until we determined we had reached data saturation, in which no new themes emerged from additional interviews.

The final sample included 26 participants from 16 unique organizations or agencies (see Table 2). Participants from the criminal justice system included police officers, probation and parole officers, municipal court staff, and other community justice initiatives staff. Other participants included housing or shelter providers, healthcare providers, public health professionals, and reentry service providers. Due to concerns about the potential identifiability of participants ' responses within their local professional network, demographic information was not collected.

Table A2. Qualitative Interview Participants by Sector

Service or System Sector	# of participants
Criminal justice system	9
Housing/shelter services	7
Healthcare/public health	7
Reentry services	3
Total	**26**

Interview and Procedures

All study procedures and materials were reviewed by the University of Montana Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection and determined to be not human subjects research.

Interviews took place virtually. They were recorded with participant consent and transcribed by a secure online transcription service. A total of 25 interviews were conducted (one interview included two participants from the same organization). Interviews lasted an average of 51 minutes (median = 56 minutes, range: 17 – 91 minutes).

We used a semi-structured interview guide to address the key research questions. Interview questions and follow-up probes were created based on our initial review of literature on homelessness and justice involvement, as well as the informational needs of our community partners. Questions covered topics including typical and atypical circumstances of homelessness and justice involvement, housing barriers for justice-involved individuals, existing resources and gaps for this population in Missoula, and recommendations for innovation and collaboration. Because of the semi-structured nature of the interviews, participants were asked slightly different sets of questions and probes as appropriate to their expertise and according to the discretion of the interviewer.

Data Analysis

We used a general inductive approach to identify prominent themes pertaining to each research question.[57] We used NVivo version 14, a qualitative data analysis software program, to code and analyze the data. Qualitative coding and analysis occurred in multiple stages. First, we organized the data by research questions. We then inductively coded the relevant data for each research question using descriptive codes. After coding all data pertaining to a research question, we collapsed and combined redundant or similar descriptive codes, then organized the codes together into larger patterns. Finally, we reviewed the data within each pattern and created descriptive narratives of key themes. To ensure the trustworthiness of our analysis, the lead analyst kept an audit trail of analytic decisions, wrote analytic memos about her reflections and observations, and debriefed about notable patterns and preliminary results with the other study interviewer and the study PI throughout data collection and analysis.

Incorporating Lived Experience: Community Pop-Ups

Purpose, Approach, and Focal Populations

To center the voices of people directly impacted by homelessness and/or justice involvement in this study, we employed a method called community pop-ups. Often used as part of community engagement efforts, community pop-ups are based on the premise of meeting people where they are already likely to spend time and gathering input or information from them in a community setting. This method is particularly appropriate for populations that may be hard to reach using traditional methods like online surveys or interviews that require more effort on the part of participants.

Our community pop-ups focused on two primary populations: 1) transition-aged youth who may have experienced housing insecurity and/or justice involvement, and 2) currently unhoused adults with justice involvement. In consultation with our partners, we identified two locations for pop-up events that would be likely to reach our focus populations:

1) **Willard Alternative High School:** This alternative school was identified as an ideal location for a youth-focused pop-up given that the school serves a population at higher risk for both housing insecurity and justice involvement.

2) **Shelter Court at the Johnson Street Emergency Shelter:** The Missoula Municipal Court, in collaboration with the Poverello Center, hosts monthly "Shelter Court" at local homeless shelters. Shelter Court is an opportunity for unhoused people with misdemeanors to appear virtually in front of a judge. This event was an ideal setting to engage with people experiencing both homelessness and justice involvement.

Procedures

All procedures for the community pop-ups were reviewed by the UM IRB and determined to be not human subjects research. We explained the purpose of our pop-up events and obtained written permission from the director/principal at each site prior to data collection.

Willard Alternative High School

We set up a series of posters for students to engage in during a break period on a school day. Students were first asked a series of screening questions to determine whether they had ever experienced housing insecurity or homelessness, had been involved in the foster care system, and whether they or their parents/family members had been justice-involved. Students were then asked to "vote" using sticky dots on a series of posters about barriers to housing and/or temporary shelter they may have faced. They were also provided with sticky notes and asked to answer two open-ended questions about key challenges and potential solutions to housing challenges for young people. Students received a Visa gift card as a thank you for their participation. To provide an alternative way of engaging older transition-aged youth who no longer attend school, we also partnered with a local youth services provider who collected similar information via phone.

Shelter Court

We set up a table and similar series of posters to engage people at the Johnson Street Shelter during the hours that Shelter Court was taking place. Participants were first asked about where they were currently living and whether they had spent time in jail or prison (and how recently). Participants were then asked to "vote" using sticky dots on a series of posters about barriers to housing and/or temporary shelter they may have faced. They were also provided with sticky notes and asked to answer two open-ended questions about key challenges and potential solutions to housing challenges for people in Missoula. Participants received a Visa gift card as a thank you for their participation.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data from each community pop-up separately using a mixed methods approach of counting, sorting, and summarizing responses. First, we counted the total number of sticky dot "votes" for each housing and shelter barrier and compiled these results into tables. Next, we summarized the notes we took regarding why participants selected each barrier. Finally, we sorted the open-ended responses into categories and summarized the responses into a written description, providing exemplar quotes where appropriate.