

Vehicle Residency: Homelessness We Struggle to Talk About

Rendered statistically invisible and targeted by restrictive laws, those living in cars are the fastest-growing segment of the unhoused US population.

By [Thacher Schmid](#)



Though absent from federal policy discussions on homelessness, vehicle residents are on the rise. (Getty)

Their voices shatter when Sara Kuust and Jake Blackburn talk about Kuust's miscarriage while residing in a Chevy Blazer. A red-light camera flashing in the dark night, in a big box parking lot near Portland. Four tiny kittens gamboling as a winter storm approached. The worldly possessions of three humans packed in "like Tetris," litter box perched. Electrical problems randomly triggering door locks. The pain and metallic smell hitting. Kuust losing it. Her cleaning up with a wet rag. No security, no police coming through in the wee hours of February 12. She hadn't sought prenatal care, didn't go to a hospital. Blackburn and their roommate cleaning with water and towels—and favorite T-shirts—until dawn.

The couple say they moved into a car after a hotel forced them out after a 78-day stay, assisted by Portland police.

How could such a thing happen? The desperate reality of vehicle residency is becoming more common in the United States. It's the nation's fastest-growing homeless subpopulation, says Sara Rankin, director of the [Homeless Rights Advocacy Project](#) at Seattle University School of Law. Laws that restrict or punish people living in vehicles are the most rapidly multiplying in the country, adds Tristia Bauman, senior attorney at the [National Homelessness Law Center](#). Yet vehicle residency remains a blind spot in federal housing and homeless services policy. Some estimate that the national population is 100,000 or more, but we don't have good data. There's no common language to talk about it, and emerging solutions are sometimes rolled out in tandem with criminalization.

"If we pay careful attention to the vehicles lining many city streets and even more remote areas," Rankin tells me, "we can see this crisis—people living in their vehicles as a last resort—is reaching an unprecedented pitch."

The NHLC estimates that 40 percent of unhoused people in West Coast cities, where the problem is concentrated, live in vehicles. It's "a growing crisis," says Mark Horvath, founder of [Invisible People](#). Los Angeles alone has an estimated [18,904 vehicle residents](#), according to the latest federal data—collected before a pandemic that [made street homelessness worse](#). Now, the Seattle Human Rights Commission warns of a "houselessness tsunami."

Vehicles offer their residents security, privacy, storage, and a way to keep pets or maintain family composition, Bauman says. When Kuust and Blackburn moved into the Blazer, shelters were packed. In the vehicle, they felt protected from Covid-19, and kept their cats. Kuust, who struggles with anxiety and post-traumatic stress, prefers cars to a tent, in which she was once hit in the head with a hard object, delivered with an epithet.

Experts at the National Health Care for the Homeless Council say people in vehicles have "much worse health outcomes" than those in shelters. "To me," Clinical Director Courtney Pladsen writes, Kuust's miscarriage "means we as a medical community failed this individual." PTSD and anxiety make it "very difficult to access health care," she adds. Stress and exposure weaken immune systems and cause insomnia.

Natural disasters contribute to the pivot toward vehicle homes, and are making them more deadly. Half those in one California county recently cited ["fires"](#) as a cause of their homelessness; a third of the homeless population of Chico are [fire survivors](#). Three of six unhoused people who died in June in an [unprecedented 116-degree Oregon heat wave](#) were vehicle residents.

Homelessness is changing, and vehicle residency is a guidepost. But cars and campers have been purposed as full-time housing for as long as they've been mass produced. In Ireland and the UK, says vehicle residency scholar Graham Pruss, itinerant groups like the Irish Travellers have used ["halting sites"](#) since 1917. In the 1920s and '30s, US migrant workers from Dust Bowl-ravaged Oklahoma—later dubbed "Okies"—alternated between shanty towns and cars during their trek along Route 66. Today cars, RVs, vans, buses, and box trucks fill urban margins.

There's still no common language. "Car camping" implies a lark; "vehicular" suggests death. San Francisco's ["vehicle triage center"](#) signals a mechanical emergency. The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) categorizes vehicle residency as "unsheltered" homelessness, though many live in RVs, designed to shelter.

This imprecision extends to the data, long contentious. How many people are homeless? The NHLC estimates [3.5 million](#), the Department of Education [1.5 million](#). HUD counts [580,466](#). Before the pandemic [closed shelters](#), [HUD's 2020 count](#) found—for the first time—more unsheltered than sheltered individuals. Then, last January, 60 percent of the agency's local partners—including those with the largest street populations—curtailed street counts. HUD's data went from ["underestimating"](#) street-based homelessness to missing it altogether.

Rankin believes HUD's approach creates "statistical invisibility" for vehicle residents, allowing officials—and all of us—to look away. So the subject "is not on people's radar," and remains absent from federal policy discussions on homelessness, Bauman says, even after the NHLC found a 213 percent increase of laws restricting vehicle residency between 2006 and 2019.

Donald Whitehead, executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, says HUD Secretary and Interagency Council on Homelessness Chair Marcia Fudge isn't prioritizing people experiencing homelessness. Fudge, Whitehead says, "does not know what's happening on the street, because she's listening to the wrong people"—the agencies and trade organizations HUD works with.

If Fudge is discussing or working on vehicle residency, there's little proof. Asked for an example of that, HUD's media team highlighted a September 22 appearance at a [National Alliance to End Homelessness conference](#) (NAEH). But NAEH spokesman Tom Murphy doesn't recall "any remarks" by Fudge on the topic. "It was not an area of focus," Murphy told me.

"We need to take a lot more time to listen to people in the experience," Whitehead says.

Deprioritizing unsheltered houseless people undercuts progressive ideas like equity, inclusivity, and anti-racism. It retraumatizes an already vulnerable group, Rankin says. Compared to people in emergency shelters, street-based populations are disproportionately comprised of marginalized and vulnerable groups, a [HUD report](#) shows.

Kuust and Blackburn identify as white and Indigenous—Kuust says she's an enrolled Alaskan Sun'aq. Blackburn's legal record includes heroin and meth possession charges, a felony forgery conviction, and a court eviction, which made renting nearly impossible. The couple were living at the Evergreen Inn and Suites, where they spent \$80 a day, \$2,400 per month, enough for a market-rate two-bedroom.

They're now plaintiffs in a [\\$1.9 million lawsuit](#) against the hotel's owners, which claims they established tenancy by staying longer than 30 days, but were forced out after giving managers an eviction moratorium document.

The owners and their attorneys declined to comment, but in legal responses, say Kuust and Blackburn damaged their room and engaged in “fraud, deceit, bad faith and/or deception.” A November court filing requests sundry records, including medical, legal, tenancy, and social media. The case appears headed for a jury trial.

Along with system gaps, there are also solutions. One that might have helped Kuust and Blackburn is a “safe parking” program, typically a secure, free overnight lot with staff, bathrooms, services, and/or hope for housing. (The pair “never heard” of this.) Two Portland suburbs have them, but not Portland itself, where one was [recently proposed](#), then scuttled. Nationally, there are 43, a [USC Price School of Public Policy survey](#) found, three-fourths on the West Coast.

Estimates of federal allocations for homeless services since the CARES Act fall between [\\$12.5 billion](#) and \$17 billion, but strict rules around federal funds force safe parking programs to rely on local jurisdictions and private donors. HUD funds are subject to “a lot of rules,” says Denis Theriault, spokesman for the Portland/Multnomah County Joint Office of Homeless Services. “HUD money goes to HUD programs.”

Portland’s Joint Office does not count vehicle residents. At the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, which does, seven providers handle 649 parking spaces in 27 programs, spokesman Ahmad Chapman says. LAHSA lots have helped 2,313 since July 2019, of whom 180 found stable housing. The programs are supported by \$1.6 million from [the Hilton Foundation](#), according to the foundation’s Senior Program Officer for Homelessness, Andrea Iloulian. That includes \$320,000 for RV safe parking, and \$1.13 million for rental assistance, furniture, storage fees, moving and application costs—plus \$150,000 for an evaluation. (HUD “is not and has no plans to track, audit, or review” safe parking programs, its spokesperson says.)

LAHSA’s programs have roughly 40 percent unused capacity (383 people enrolled, 649 parking spaces). It’s not clear why. Invisible People’s Horvath surveyed unhoused people about safe parking programs generally; their responses included onerous rules, limited hours, having to leave early, registration, insurance and vehicle ownership requirements, having to find a new place to park each day, higher gas costs.

“It’s a myth that people are service-resistant,” Horvath says. “Services are people-resistant.”

Safe lots remain controversial even in California, where Governor Gavin Newsom [vetoed a 2019 bill](#) that would have forced large cities to provide safe lots. They may come with new laws or increased enforcement, a trend Carlos Wadkins, a human rights organizer at the [San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness](#), calls the “standard playbook.” In San Diego, a 2019 ban came [hand-in-hand with](#) new programs.

Programs for large vehicles appear to be a key gap. “It’s not just a one-size-fits-all solution,” Pruss says. His UCSF [Benioff Homelessness and Housing Initiative](#) recently studied residents of larger vehicles in Oakland. “We saw people who had very clear needs, and many that were not being met,” Pruss says. In “supportive” parking models, larger vehicles can function as “transitional” or “long-term” housing.

But knowledge is also increasing. Pruss and Bauman are planning what may be the first national vehicle residency legal forum. The safe lot concept has gone from “wild and crazy” to “obvious” in the Bay Area, says Adrienne Lauby, board president of [Sonoma Applied Village Services](#). If the pandemic has a silver lining, Rankin says, it’s seeing how our collective health is interwoven.

Kuust and Blackburn seem angry, not bitter. Ironically, just hours after Kuust’s miscarriage, they say, Legal Aid Society of Oregon staff called to say a judge had just ordered their return to the hotel. They moved back in. Now, once again, they have the time, space, and warmth to envision greater financial and housing stability.

They also still own two vehicles, just in case.

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