

Hidden Homelessness: How many Rhode Islanders live doubled up?

Understanding the full spectrum of homelessness

Each year, volunteers fan out across Rhode Island to count people living outside and in shelters, a massive community effort that helps track progress on homelessness and guides how resources are allocated. But this snapshot, known as the Point-in-Time count, captures only the most visible forms of homelessness. Hidden from the count are those who are doubled up—sharing housing with family, friends, or acquaintances because they have nowhere else to go.

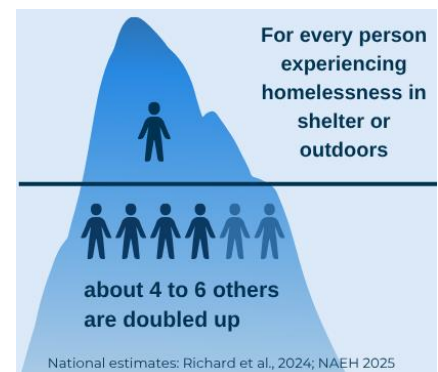
Doubled-up homelessness is defined as sharing housing due to economic hardship, housing loss, or barriers to affording housing of one’s own. While relying on help from others can provide important support during difficult times, doubled-up living situations can also involve stress, instability, overcrowding, and negative impacts on health and well-being.^{1,2}

Doubling up can take many forms: a young adult couch surfing between friends’ homes, a mother and her children sleeping in one room at a grandparent’s house, or multiple working adults sharing a crowded apartment. Although some prefer multigenerational or shared living arrangements, doubled-up homelessness refers to situations that are experienced as unstable, insecure, or inadequate. Because of these challenges, doubling up is a primary pathway into other forms of homelessness.³

How do we measure doubled-up homelessness?

Governments are required to conduct sheltered and unsheltered counts, but because doubling up is not included in official homelessness counts, a major form of housing insecurity remains largely invisible. Researchers, policymakers, and advocates therefore use additional data sources to better understand the full spectrum of homelessness.

Estimates of doubled-up homelessness come from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey (ACS), an annual representative survey of U.S. households.¹ These measures are designed to identify people most likely to be sharing housing because of economic hardship, using indicators such as poverty, household relationships, and overcrowding. National and local organizations use these data to better understand the size and characteristics of the doubled-up population – both to document a broader spectrum of homelessness^{4,5,6}, and to estimate the population at high risk of sheltered and unsheltered homelessness.^{7,8}



Doubled-up homelessness in Rhode Island

The most recent and reliable ACS source is the 2020–2025 five-year dataset. Rather than representing a single-year count, it reflects average conditions across the full five-year period, which helps produce more reliable estimates for relatively small populations.

Based on these data, an estimated average of **5,641 individuals** experienced doubled-up homelessness in Rhode Island during 2020–2024. This represents 4.6% of all Rhode Islanders living in or near poverty.

Doubled-up homeless individuals, 2020-2024

State	Estimate (90% CI)	Prevalence % (90% CI)	Rate per 100 in poverty (90% CI)
Rhode Island	5,641 (4,607–6,675)	0.53% (0.43%–0.63%)	4.64% (3.82–5.47)

Note: Estimates use 2024 ACS 5-year Public Use Microdata. 90% confidence intervals shown in parentheses (estimate ± margin of error at 90% confidence interval). Prevalence (Prev. %) = doubled-up individuals as a share of total population. Rate/100 poverty = estimated doubled-up persons per 100 people at or below 125% of a housing-cost adjusted poverty threshold

The ACS one-year dataset for 2024 provides a more current snapshot of conditions, but the smaller sample size makes them less reliable for examining the characteristics of people experiencing doubled-up homelessness in a small state like Rhode Island.

Still, these data suggest that an average of nearly 10,000 people—an estimate of 9,998 individuals—were experiencing doubled-up homelessness in Rhode Island at any given point during 2024 (nearly 7% of the population in/near poverty).

The higher estimate observed in the 2024 one-year data could reflect worsening affordability conditions and a growing number of Rhode Islanders relying on doubled-up living situations.

Doubled-up homeless individuals, 2024

State	Estimate (90% CI)	Prevalence % (90% CI)	Rate per 100 in poverty (90% CI)
Rhode Island	9,998 (6,256–13,740)	0.94% (0.59%–1.29%)	6.94% (4.47–9.41%)

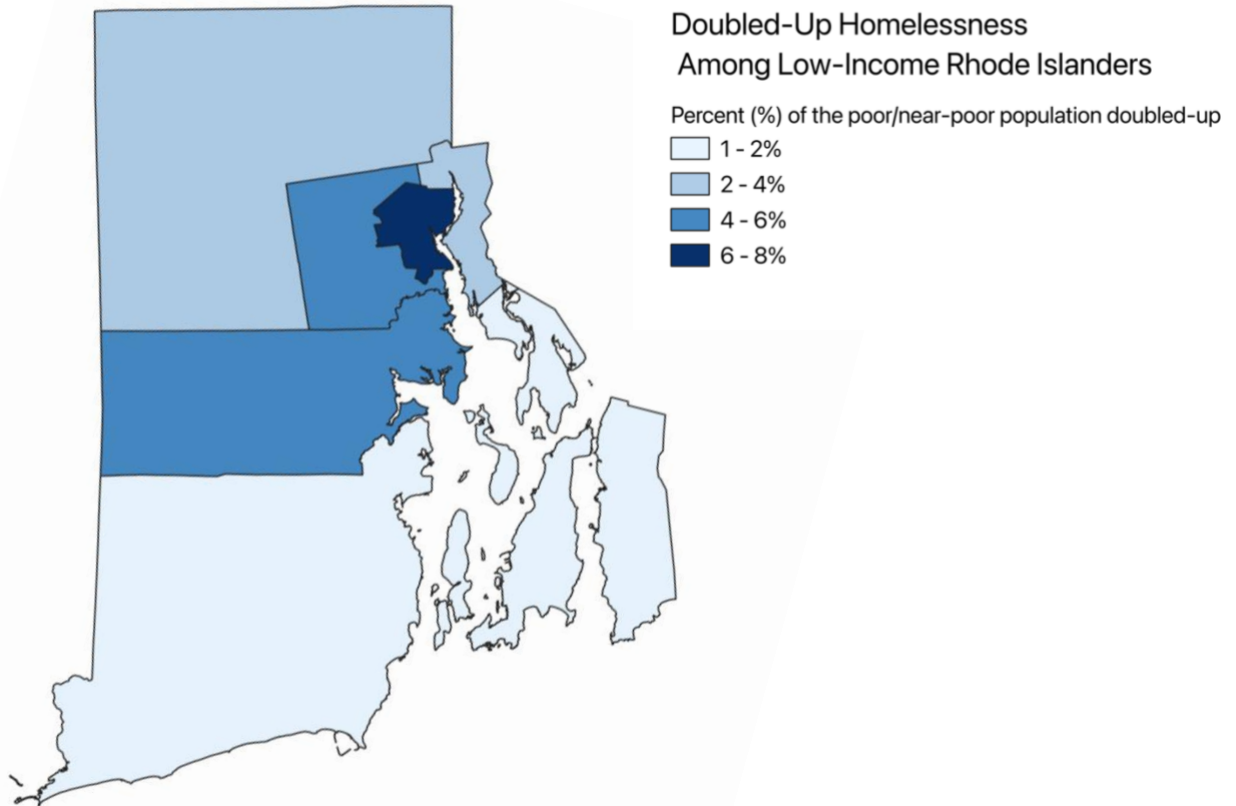
Note: Estimates use 2024 ACS 5-year Public Use Microdata. 90% confidence intervals shown in parentheses (estimate ± margin of error at 90% confidence interval). Prevalence (Prev. %) = doubled-up individuals as a share of total population. Rate/100 poverty = estimated doubled-up persons per 100 people at or below 125% of a housing-cost adjusted poverty threshold

The remaining estimates that show doubling up by geography, race, and ethnicity draw on the five-year data and represent average characteristics for 2020-2024.

Doubled-up homelessness by area, 2020-2024

Rhode Island Areas (PUMA)	Estimate (90% CI)	Prevalence % (90% CI)	Rate per 100 in poverty (90% CI)
Providence City	2,832 (1,958–3,706)	1.60% (1.11–2.09%)	7.63% (5.41–9.85)
Northern Providence County & Woonsocket	363 (127–599)	0.21% (0.07–0.35%)	2.49% (0.96–4.02)
Pawtucket, Central Falls & East Providence	779 (373–1,185)	0.54% (0.26–0.82%)	3.71% (1.75–5.67)
Central Providence County (North Providence & Northern Suburbs)	602 (350–854)	0.42% (0.24–0.60%)	4.46% (2.61–6.31)
Central RI (Kent County & Warwick)	806 (430–1,182)	0.48% (0.26–0.70%)	5.36% (2.87–7.85)
Southeast RI (Newport & Bristol Counties)	141 (47–235)	0.11% (0.04–0.18%)	1.33% (0.47–2.19)
Washington County (South County)	118 (23–213)	0.10% (0.02–0.18%)	1.21% (0.24–2.18)

Note: Estimates use 2024 ACS 5-year Public Use Microdata. 90% confidence intervals shown in parentheses (estimate ± margin of error at 90% confidence interval). PUMA = Public Use Microdata Area. Prevalence (Prev. %) = doubled-up individuals as a share of total population. Rate/100 poverty = estimated doubled-up persons per 100 people at or below 125% of a housing-cost adjusted poverty threshold



Doubled-up homelessness by race/ethnicity, 2020-2024

Race/Ethnicity	Estimate (90% CI)	Prevalence % (90% CI)	Rate per 100 in poverty (90% CI)
White	2,541 (1,829–3,253)	0.34% (0.25–0.44%)	4.07% (3.02–5.11%)
(White non-Hispanic/Latine)	1,980 (1,451–2,509)	0.28% (0.20–0.35%)	3.45% (2.57–4.34%)
Black	648 (197–1,099)	1.17% (0.35–1.98%)	7.55% (2.70–12.41%)
Asian	540 (189–891)	1.46% (0.52–2.40%)	14.39% (7.04–21.73%)
Other Race	806 (394–1,218)	0.95% (0.46–1.43%)	4.02% (2.06–5.97%)
Two or More Races	1,106 (708–1,504)	0.84% (0.53–1.15%)	4.29% (2.73–5.84%)
Hispanic/Latine (of any race)	2,386 (1,579–3,193)	1.35% (0.83–1.68%)	5.36% (3.56–7.16 %)

Note: Estimates use 2024 ACS 5-year Public Use Microdata. 90% confidence intervals shown in parentheses (estimate ± margin of error at 90% confidence interval). PUMA = Public Use Microdata Area. Prevalence (Prev. %) = doubled-up individuals as a share of total population. Rate/100 poverty = estimated doubled-up persons per 100 people at or below 125% of a housing-cost adjusted poverty threshold. Data on American Indian and Alaska Native individuals are included in “Other Race” due to low reliability of the estimate. The category “White” includes White Hispanic and non-Hispanic.

The relationship between doubled-up homelessness, race, and ethnicity shown in the table above reflects a large body of research showing that households of color continue to face disparate barriers to stable housing. Past research on doubling up shows higher rates among Black, Asian, Latine, multiracial, and indigenous communities across the U.S.^{1,6}

Broader research also documents stark racial disparities in sheltered and unsheltered homelessness, driven by racism and discrimination across housing, employment, social welfare, criminal justice, and health care.^{9,10} Looking at data on doubling up can be especially important for populations who may avoid shelters or formal systems due to language barriers, fear of immigration enforcement, or mistrust of institutions.⁶

What else do we know about doubled-up homelessness in RI?

Additional information on doubled-up homelessness among children comes from public schools through the federal McKinney-Vento program. Each year, schools identify students experiencing homelessness, including many children living doubled up.

Although school-based counts can be limited by school capacity and family disclosure, these data represent real children identified by school personnel as experiencing homelessness within doubled-up living situations.

During the 2024-2025 school year in Rhode Island, a total of 1,251 children were identified as experiencing doubled-up homelessness through the work of Rhode Island educators and McKinney-Vento liaisons.¹¹

What can we do?

Addressing doubled-up homelessness is part of broader efforts to address homelessness, housing insecurity, and the social determinants of health. Program and policy responses can be understood across several interconnected areas:

- **Homelessness response.** The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) uses a definition of homelessness that excludes doubled-up situations, leaving many people in these arrangements ineligible for federally funded homelessness assistance programs. Some places have expanded local definitions of homelessness to allow people living doubled up to qualify for certain city- or state-funded services. Expanding eligibility can help households access support earlier, before housing situations become unsustainable, and other systems, including child welfare agencies and school districts, can also assist families who do not meet HUD's definition.
- **Homelessness prevention.** Programs designed to prevent sheltered and unsheltered homelessness often assist people who are doubling up. Strategies for homelessness prevention include: rental assistance; flexible financial assistance (e.g., utilities, moving costs, and childcare); housing navigation support; and legal services to help individuals manage relationships with landlords and prevent eviction.^{12,13} Nationally and in RI, homelessness response systems generally have more established federal funding streams and coordinated infrastructure, while prevention programs are newer and not consistently available.
- **Housing affordability and availability.** Policies that improve housing affordability and availability reduce the pressures that drive households to double up.^{14,15} This includes strategies to produce more housing, preserve existing affordable housing, and protect renters from steep rent increases. Affordable housing designed for multigenerational households can also support voluntary shared housing by providing adequate space and healthy living conditions. Growing concern about housing costs in Rhode Island and across the U.S. has led to increased attention on policies that support affordable housing and stabilize renters.
- **Economic stability.** The gap between housing costs and incomes drives housing insecurity and homelessness.^{14,16} Efforts to strengthen economic security, including stronger employment opportunities, higher wages, and social safety net programs, will help Rhode Islanders maintain stable housing and reduce the likelihood of housing loss or overcrowding.

These strategies are complementary rather than competing approaches. Long-term progress addressing homelessness and housing insecurity requires coordinated efforts across homelessness assistance and prevention services, housing policy, economic opportunity, and public health.

Housing is a foundational social determinant of health, meaning efforts to improve housing stability are also investments in the health and well-being of Rhode Island communities.

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