

# King County Homeless Response System

DATA REVIEW: Q1 2021 Release

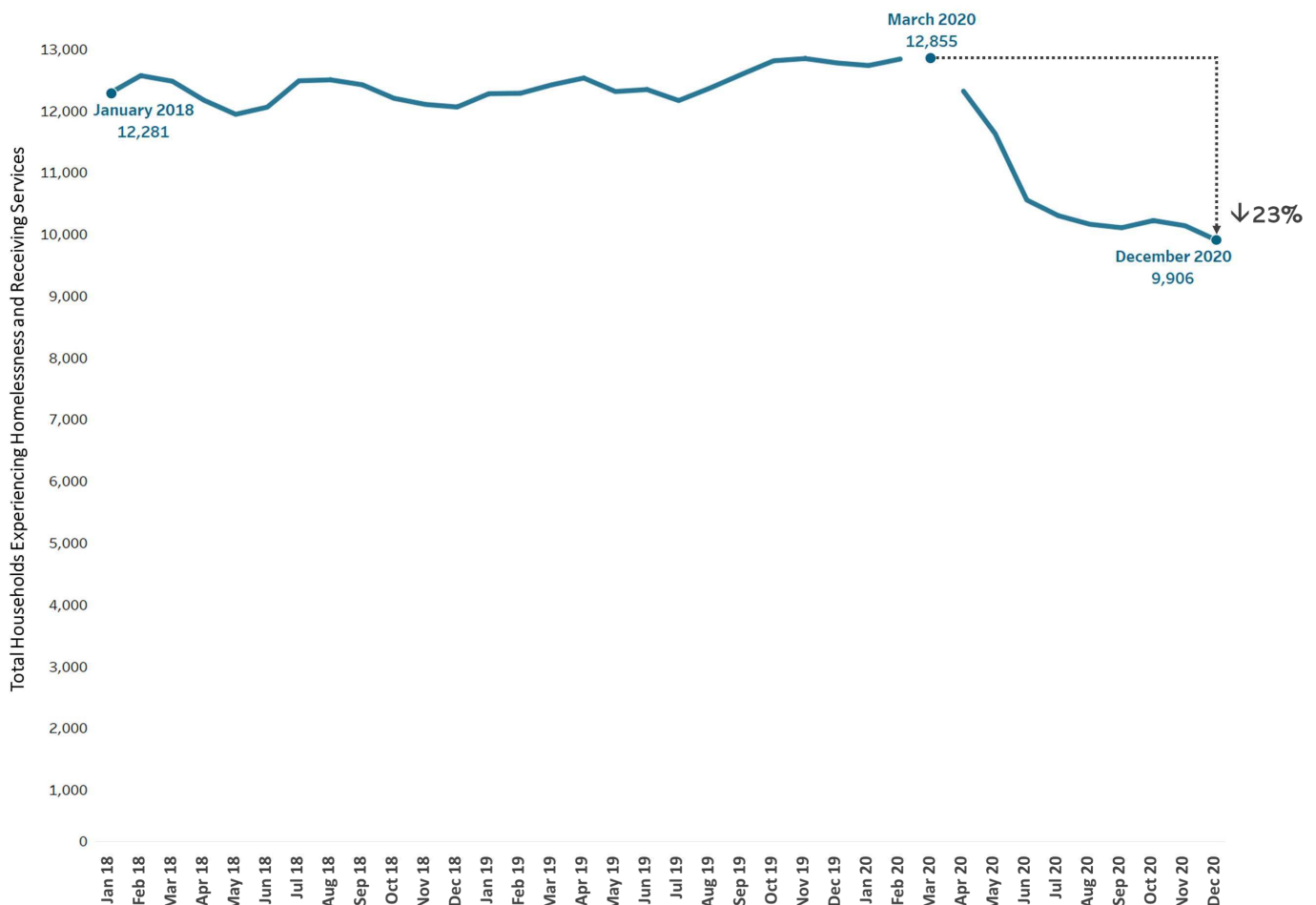


King County

**The number of households in the homeless response system declined following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020.**

King County confirmed its first case of COVID-19 on February 26, 2020 and local and statewide orders prohibiting large gatherings to mitigate spread were issued shortly thereafter. According to the Seattle/King County Homeless Management Information System (HMIS), the number of households in the homeless response system started to decline following the onset of the pandemic. On December 31, 2020, 9,906 households were experiencing homelessness and receiving services from the homeless response system. **Data show that between March 31, 2020 and December 31, 2020, the number of households actively being served by the homeless response system declined by 23%.** In this Data Review, we explore the potential reasons for this decline as well as broader system impacts of COVID-19.

**FIGURE 1: NUMBER OF HOUSEHOLDS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS AND RECEIVING SERVICES IN THE KING COUNTY HOMELESS RESPONSE SYSTEM**  
JANUARY 2018 – DECEMBER 2020



Source: Data includes households experiencing homelessness and receiving services as captured in the Seattle/King County Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) as of 2/1/2021. Note, these findings are preliminary and subject to change as updates are made to HMIS.

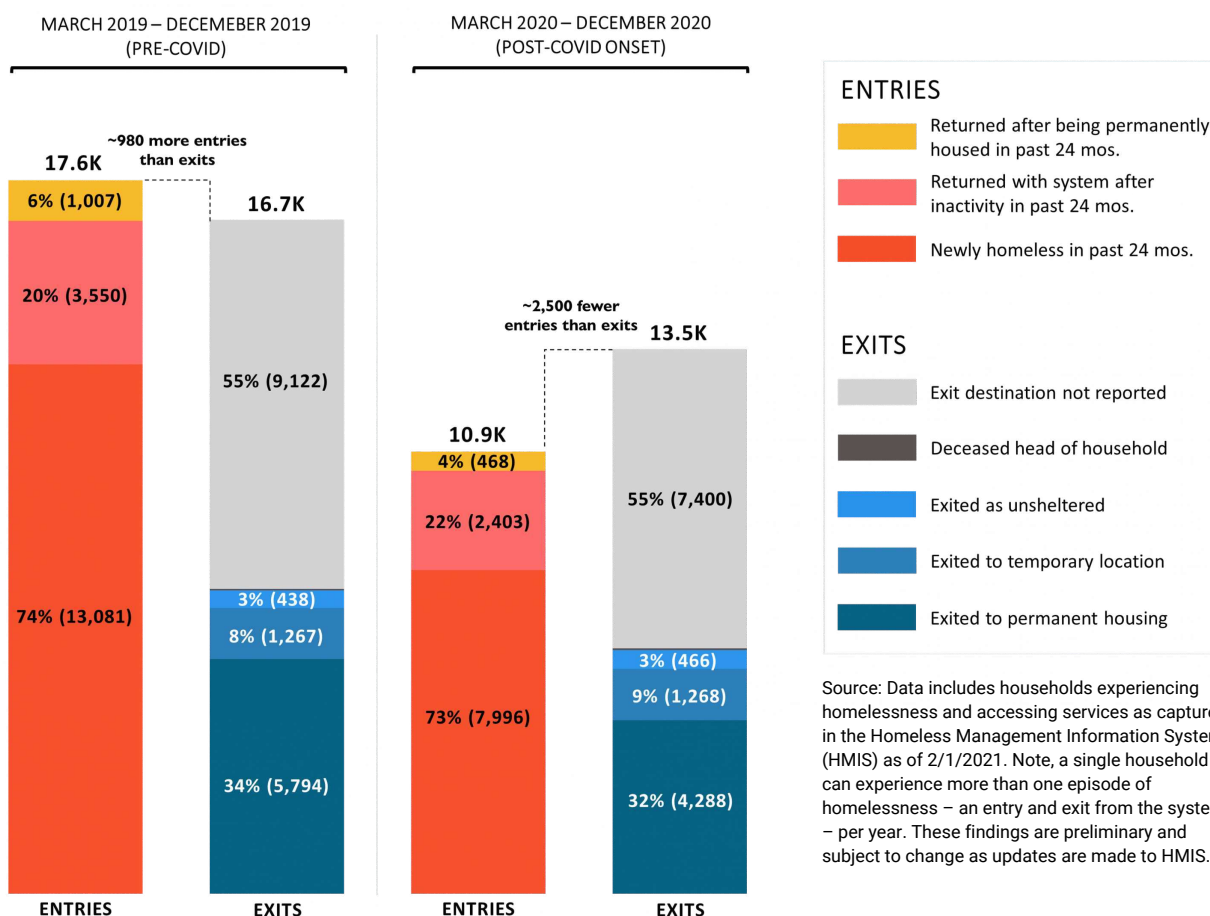
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## The number of households entering the homeless response system during the first ten months of the pandemic was lower than the number of those exiting it.

When the number of households entering the homeless response system is higher than the number of those exiting it, we expect to see the number of households experiencing homelessness and receiving services increase. This had been the [trend for the past few years in King County](#). However, between **March 2020 and December 2020, approximately 2,500 fewer households entered the homeless response system than exited it. Consequently, we observed the number of households in the system fall.** This shift seems driven by significantly fewer – nearly 7,000 fewer – households that entered the homeless response system during the first ten months of the pandemic compared to the same ten-month period in 2019.

While COVID-19 has impacted the local economy and increased unemployment, response efforts may mitigate its impacts on factors that have historically driven homelessness and increased entries into the homeless response system. The prevailing eviction moratorium, stimulus payments<sup>(1)</sup>, extended unemployment insurance, emergency rental assistance, and [drops in rental prices](#) may be preventing the worst economic effects of the pandemic – at least in the near term. However, without additional intervention, researchers [predict a rise in homelessness](#) in coming years.

**FIGURE 2: ENTRIES AND EXITS IN THE KING COUNTY HOMELESS RESPONSE SYSTEM**  
MARCH - SEPTEMBER 2019 VS. MARCH - SEPTEMBER 2020



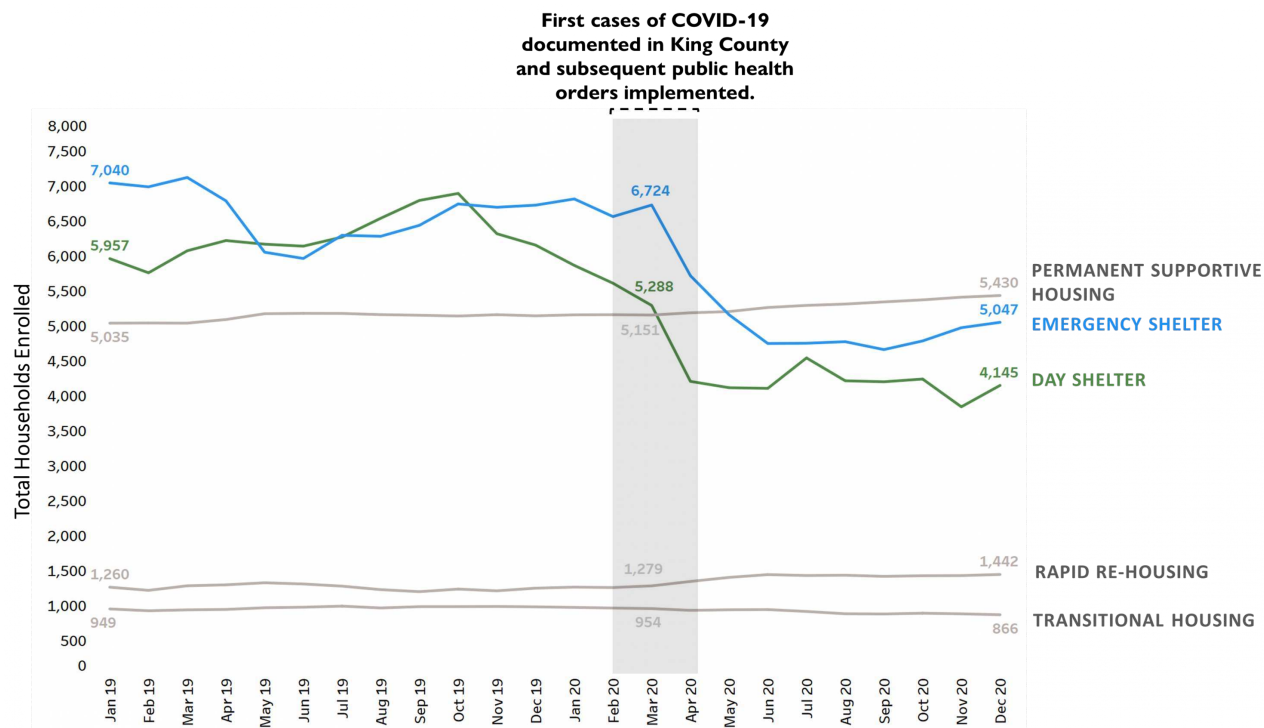
(1) Stimulus checks from the CARES Act lifted 18 million people out of poverty in April, falling to 4 million people in August and September after the expiration of the \$600 per week unemployment supplement. From: <https://www.povertycenter.columbia.edu/news-internal/2020/covid-projecting-monthly-poverty>

## 2 The number of households enrolled in emergency services (overnight and day shelters) declined following the onset of the pandemic.

According to the Seattle/King County Housing Inventory Count (HIC), the number of emergency shelter and permanent housing units in King County increased between 2019 and 2020 while transitional housing and rapid re-housing units decreased slightly.<sup>(2)</sup> We expected the number of households enrolled in these programs to reflect these changes in 2020 (e.g. for the number of households enrolled in emergency shelters to increase). **However, following the first case of COVID-19 in February 2020 and the initial implementation of local public health orders in March, the number of households enrolled in emergency services sharply declined. From March to December 2020, enrollments in day shelters and emergency shelters fell by 22% and 25%, respectively.**

Preliminary HMIS data show that the average utilization rate of emergency shelters was lower in 2020 than in 2019 – 78% compared to 89%. In conversations with outreach providers, they noted that many individuals are reluctant to use shelter services in congregate settings due to the risk of exposure to COVID-19. Furthermore, provider agencies have continuously adapted to meet the changing needs of households during the pandemic, which may have included adjusting the number of beds available in a program. The upcoming results of the 2021 HIC will further illuminate shifts in the system's capacity in 2020. The combined effects of these changes have likely contributed to the overall decline in the total number of households actively being served in the homeless response system.

**FIGURE 3: MONTHLY ENROLLMENTS IN DAY SHELTER, EMERGENCY SHELTER, TRANSITIONAL HOUSING, RAPID RE-HOUSING, AND PERMANENT SUPPORTIVE HOUSING PROGRAMS**  
JANUARY 2019 – DECEMBER 2020



Source: Data includes households enrolled in day shelter, emergency shelter, transitional housing, rapid re-housing, and permanent supportive housing programs as captured in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) as of 2/1/2021. Note, these findings are preliminary and subject to change as updates are made to HMIS.

(2) The Housing Inventory Count is a point-in-time inventory of provider programs within a Continuum of Care that provides beds and units dedicated to serve persons who are homeless. From 2019 to 2020, data from the Seattle/King County HIC shows that emergency shelter units increased from 4,811 to 5,060 and permanent housing units increased from 7,718 to 8,177.

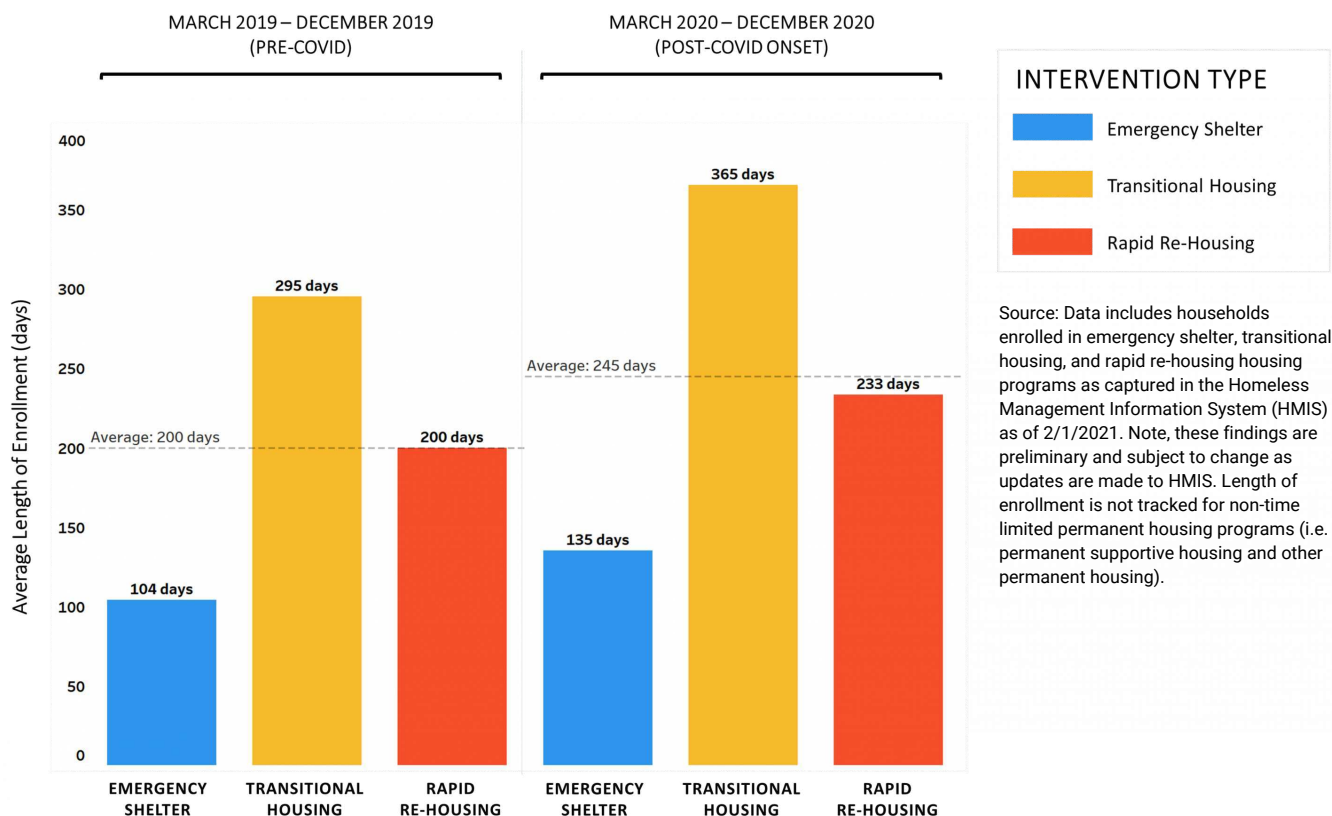
### 3 The average amount of time households were enrolled in a program increased across all intervention types for which this measure is tracked (i.e. emergency shelter, transitional housing, and rapid re-housing programs).

During the first ten months of the pandemic, the overall average length of time a household remained enrolled in a program was 245 days, more than a month longer than the average reported in the same time period in 2019. We observed the greatest increase in the length of stay for households enrolled in transitional housing – the average length of time in a transitional housing program was 365 days (70 days longer than in 2019). The average length of stay was 233 days for rapid re-housing programs (33 days longer than in 2019) and 135 days for emergency shelters (31 days longer than in 2019).

While these interventions are intended to provide a short-term service, a modest increase in duration is preferable if it leads to better housing and health outcomes. Additionally, provider agencies have made it a priority to follow public health guidance and reduce the spread of COVID-19 among individuals experiencing homelessness. Thus, in the context of the pandemic and stay-at-home order, stability may also reduce disease spread – the primary goal at this time. **While the system has maintained continuity of services during the pandemic, the capacity of programs to bring on new enrollments became limited over time as households stabilized and stayed enrolled longer. This resulted in fewer enrollments in the system over time.**

**FIGURE 4: AVERAGE LENGTH OF ENROLLMENT IN EMERGENCY SHELTER, TRANSITIONAL HOUSING, AND RAPID RE-HOUSING PROGRAMS**

MARCH – DECEMBER 2019 VS. MARCH – DECEMBER 2020



## Key Takeaways

In sum, the decline in the number of households experiencing homelessness and receiving services in the King County Homeless Response System since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic is the result of three primary drivers:

- 1. While both entries and exits in the homeless response system fell during the first ten months of the pandemic, entries fell by more. Fewer households entered the system than exited it, leading to a decline in the overall number of households active in the system.**
- 2. Entries into the system slowed largely driven by fewer households enrolling in and using services in emergency overnight and day shelters.**
- 3. Households are staying enrolled in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and rapid re-housing program longer thereby limiting the system's capacity to bring on new households over time.**

When reviewing data across different demographic characteristics for households actively served in the system, we found that the distribution across race and ethnicity, age groups, and veteran status remained largely unchanged from March to December 2020. However, the household composition of those actively served appeared to shift away from adult-only households. This is likely because a high proportion of emergency services – roughly 80% of emergency shelter beds – are targeted to serve single adults and, as previously mentioned, the reduced utilization of emergency services was one of the primary drivers in the overall decline of households in the system.

King County Regional Homelessness Authority Households Served Dashboards, Population Trends:  
<https://regionalhomelesssystem.org/households-served/>

## Next Steps

While HMIS is a rich data source for understanding homelessness for households in the King County homeless response system, it is limited for those that are not. As such, additional research is needed to develop our understanding of impacts of COVID-19. Our evaluation team will continue to explore COVID-19 system impacts in future follow-up analyses.

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## Release Notes

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