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THE NEWS

# Homelessness doesn't look the same for everybody

By Tonia Hill

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Graphic by Ash Lane for The TRiibe®

There are a variety of reasons that can cause someone to face housing insecurity. Tynetta Hill-Muhammad, who grew up in Georgia and Louisiana, migrated north to Chicago in 2014 to attend the University of Illinois at Chicago. In their second year of undergrad, they were having issues with their student loans, and couldn't ask for support from their mom, who was supporting their younger siblings as a single parent. This led to Hill-Muhammad experiencing homelessness. They slept on a friend's couch for five months until they were able to save enough money to move into a place with roommates.

"I felt a lot of scarcity, trauma, and a lot of insecurity," Hill-Muhammad, who uses they/them pronouns, said about their experience sleeping on their friend's couch. They graduated from undergrad in 2018, and today, they're pursuing a master's of public health at UIC. They live with their partner and dog in South Shore.

Although Hill-Muhammad's experience with homelessness was temporary, the weight and trauma of their previous housing insecurity remains, they explained.

"I had to prioritize working over school because I was fearful that I'd end up in a situation similar to that again, and I needed to know that my bills were paid and I had enough money," they said.

They balanced part-time work, where they made minimum wage and college courses.

There are many faces of homelessness in Chicago. Some people live in temporary shelters, on the streets, in tents, or are living doubled up with others. In most cases, living doubled up means staying with someone else whose name is on the lease due to economic hardship. It could also mean there are more people sharing an apartment than available bedrooms in that apartment.

Living this way can take a toll on the mental and emotional health of those experiencing it and create deep



insecurities.

In Hill-Muhammad's case, they were comfortable and safe sleeping on the couch in their friend's one bedroom apartment. However, they added that some people who are doubling up may lack personal space and privacy. The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless (CCH) estimates that 68,440 people are experiencing some form of homelessness, according to its 2023 [annual report](#). This figure includes accounts for people who are "doubling up." Homelessness disproportionately affects Black and Latiné residents. Though Black residents make up nearly 30 percent of the city's population, more than 53 percent are experiencing homelessness.

"When you sleep and live on the couch for five months, you're at the whim of another person, and it's a deep insecurity that comes about from that type of experience," they said. "In the society we live in, people say, 'this person is homeless because of whatever decisions that they made.' It's not about the decisions individuals make. It's about what social safety nets exist to ensure that people have the things they need."

Homelessness and affordable housing have long been an issue in Chicago, and considering the lingering economic impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, rising home costs due to inflation, and the ongoing housing shortage alongside the influx of more than 30,000 migrants fleeing political and socio-economic strife in Central America, further illuminates the city's housing crisis.

As the March 19 Illinois primary election draws near, countless housing advocates are looking to Chicago voters to approve Bring Chicago Home, a proposal that would increase the real estate transfer tax — a one-time tax levied on property sales — to create a designated revenue stream that would provide permanent housing for people experiencing homelessness.



West Sider Crystal Gardner, Associate Political Director at SEIU 73, speaks at the Bring Chicago Home rally outside of a Loop courthouse on Friday, March 1, 2024. Photo by Tyger Ligon for The TRiiBE®

The TRiiBE spoke to three Black people in Chicago who are currently experiencing or have previously experienced, housing insecurity. Their experiences highlight how systemic barriers like finances and the lack of affordable housing lead to thousands of people being unhoused.

Each of them supports the Bring Chicago Home proposal.



"I truly believe that building housing and making sure that folks have access to mental health services, to food, and that folks know where their resources are across the city, and then creating more resources, not just concentrated within the nonprofit space but through the city, is going to help young folks and children who are experiencing housing insecurity," they said.

## WHAT THEY'RE GOING THROUGH

Amaiya Williams, 22, is currently living in a shelter while job hunting because she can't yet afford to live independently. In November 2023, she left her hometown of Brooklyn, New York, for Chicago because she was having challenges living with a parent. She gave her job a two-weeks notice and then moved to Chicago because she wanted a change of pace, but did not have a job lined up before she moved states. She'd visited the city for the first time in 2021 and decided it was the slower pace she needed.

According to CCH, 12,000 young adults between the ages of 18 and 24, like Williams, are experiencing homelessness.

"My last job paid \$21 an hour," she said, referring to her previous job in New York, where she worked in customer service at a museum. "So, I'm not looking for anything below that. I feel like I have to fight a little harder to find work that pays a livable wage," she added.

At many shelters, guests must abide by strict rules, including that you must leave each morning at a certain time and return that evening to be assigned a bed for the night. You cannot leave any of your belongings at the shelter. So, people often lug all of their belongings with them on the streets while waiting to return for the evening. Williams did that in Chicago while she was unhoused.

"I had luggage with me. I had a lot of stuff with me, so I had to walk for hours every day with my luggage. It's just very dehumanizing. That's what I remember," Williams said.

She said she sometimes rode the CTA, went for long walks to admire the city's architecture, or frequented public libraries to pass the time.

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## **Bring Chicago Home referendum is approved for the March 19 primary ballot**

On Wednesday, an Illinois Appellate Court ruled that votes for the Bring Chicago Home ballot question should be counted following a legal battle between real estate groups and housing advocates.

When she arrived in the city in 2023, she lived in an Airbnb, but it became too expensive—about \$500 for her stay, she recalled. So she returned to O'Hare International Airport and considered moving back home because she couldn't make it work.

"[But] I just was like, I'm supposed to be here. I'm gonna figure it out," she said.

At the airport, she was directed to an office that assists unhoused people in finding shelter. She transitioned to a shelter and would later temporarily stay at The Night Ministry, a Chicago-based organization that provides human support and healthcare to the unhoused and those experiencing homelessness.

Williams was placed in a four-month residential program at Covenant House Illinois in mid-December 2023. Covenant House supports young people between 18 and 24 by connecting them to wraparound services, including food, medical and mental healthcare, shelter care, and safety, to build trust and community for a better tomorrow, said Johnpaul Higgins, the director of development at Covenant House.

The organization is located in East Garfield Park and primarily serves Black and Brown youth. Covenant House offers emergency shelter as well as transitional and supportive housing.

Over half of the young people who come into their care are unemployed. Some self-report some sort of mental or behavioral health issues and nearly half are domestic violence survivors, Higgins explained. A little over 30 percent have exited the foster care system and don't have a high school diploma or GED certificate. And of the youth that seek their care; nearly half identify as queer.





Black and brown youth, especially those who identify as LGBTQ+, experience much **higher rates of homelessness than their peers.**

"The young people who come to our doors are looking for assistance and help but do not have adequate social support that works. That's just a fact," he said.

In Chicago, nearly half of renters spend more than 30 percent of their annual income on housing, according to **research** from the Institute for Housing Studies (IHS) at DePaul University.

Additionally, a *Block Club Chicago* and Illinois Answers Project investigation found that the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) has nearly "**500 vacant homes** that are part of its scattered-site program."

Researchers at IHS link the lack of affordable housing units to the **loss of two—and four-flat buildings** that are no longer available due to foreclosure, vacancy, or abandonment. According to the IHS report, those types of buildings are more likely to be affordable and large enough for families.

### What is #BringChicagoHome? The TRiiBE explains Chicago Ballot Question 1



"We live in a city where there are abandoned buildings. There's like widespread blocks that are not developed and there are people who are homeless and housing insecure," Hill-Muhammad said.

They added that the first step is ensuring people have what they need to survive: housing, food, employment and healthcare.

Having basic needs met, like having a roof over your head, decreases recidivism among formerly incarcerated people, according to a **report** from the Great Cities Institute at the UIC. Brian Rodgers, a South Shore native who's had periods of incarceration, told *The TRiiBE* that not having a home can lead to some people making erratic decisions only to end up returning to jail or prison.

Rodgers, 50, has been in and out of jail and prison since 2008. His last period of incarceration was for seven years. When Rodgers would transition between incarceration and back home to Chicago, he didn't always have a place to stay. In the years he was away, his mother and grandmother passed away. So, he experienced various forms of homelessness, including doubling up, temporarily staying on the street or in shelters, living in abandoned buildings or sleeping in his car.

"I was literally carrying everything that I own, which was probably a couple of underwear, socks, a hygiene kit, a jogging suit, and gym shoes. I was walking down 79th Street, and people who knew me in the neighborhood and knew my family said, 'I can't let you just stay out on the street,' and that's how most of my stays went," he said.



Leading up to his release from prison in 2023, he was looking for transitional housing for formerly incarcerated people with specific wraparound supports, which he felt were lacking at shelters like [Pacific Garden Mission](#) on the Near West Side. Saint Leonard Ministries was a more desirable location, he said, because it has a surplus of resources and assistance to keep people from returning to jail or prison.

Meanwhile, while on the apartment hunt, the criminal convictions on his record hindered his ability to find housing because some landlords explicitly told him they wouldn't rent to formerly incarcerated people. In 2019, the Cook County Board of Commissioners passed the [Just Housing Amendment](#), prohibiting housing discrimination based on people's criminal history.

Today, he's a grassroots leader, outreach assistant, and a member of the speaker's bureau at CCH.

"The issue would always come up not only having a record but also not having credit or rental history to go with it. The gaps in the time in which I was incarcerated played a role against me," Rodgers explained.

"The lack of rental history and mostly the conviction were the main two obstacles I would face as I try to find housing."

According to a [joint report](#) from the Metropolitan Planning Council and the Illinois Justice Project, 60% of men and 58% of women who were formerly incarcerated are unhoused in Chicago.

Rodgers said he'd applied to many apartments over the years and got denied for the same issues: his criminal record, lack of job or credit history, and rental history. However, the apartments he was approved for were in less desirable neighborhoods and not the best quality.

Since his January 2023 release, he's lived in transitional housing at Saint Leonard's Ministries, an organization primarily serving formerly incarcerated people of color from the South and West Sides. Saint Leonard's also provides wraparound supportive services such as meals, healthcare, and mental health support, substance abuse treatment and permanent housing.

Rodgers, Hill-Muhammad and Williams have canvassed in Chicago on behalf of the Bring Chicago Home coalition.

"It's one thing to understand that there are people who are experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity, who are having a hard time. It's another to acknowledge that and do something about it," Williams said.

***Tonia Hill*** is a multimedia reporter for *The TRiiBE*.



[Bring Chicago Home](#) [housing](#) [Illinois Primary Election 2024](#)

