

John Lombard, Candidate for City Council, District 5: Position Statement on Homelessness

Seattle is in the middle of BOTH a drug crisis and a housing crisis. The two crises overlap, but it is misleading to lump them together in discussions of “the homeless.” They need to be kept distinct in our minds, because they require very different sets of actions to address. In emotionally charged debates over what to do about “the homeless,” many of those who emphasize one of these crises tend to deny or minimize the other. But both are real and very serious.

It is the drug crisis, not the housing crisis, that is primarily responsible for the increases in property crime and public disorder that have raised public ire across Seattle. Yet so far, most of the City’s attention has focused on the housing crisis. Neglect of the drug crisis and its effects on communities has further inflamed the public, making it that much more difficult to address the housing crisis.

Both crises are the source of a great deal of human misery and suffering. Both are complex. And both require our urgent attention.

The Drug Crisis

I believe the drug crisis requires tough-minded, realistic compassion. Certainly more treatment services need to be available, not just for drug addiction but for the mental health needs that so frequently are related. I support a “harm reduction” approach to addiction itself, recognizing that addiction is a powerful psychological and physical force that can override virtually all other considerations for a user. The motivation to challenge and overcome addiction must ultimately come from within, as those who have witnessed loved ones fall prey to addiction know painfully well. However, the line between accepting the necessity of internal motivation and enabling self-destructive behavior is not always clear. When addiction overrides concern for the welfare of others—when, for example, it leads to theft to pay for one’s habit—then laws to protect the public welfare need to be enforced. And when an addict—or anyone else—breaks the law repeatedly, enforcement needs to come with strict consequences. Treatment needs to be available, but enforcement may provide the necessary motivation for an addict to challenge his or her addiction. If not, it can at least protect the rest of society from the addict’s destructive behavior.

Much of the criminal justice system—including the Prosecuting Attorney’s Office, the courts, and the corrections system—is outside the control of City government. Moreover, the courts, the Prosecuting Attorney, and the City Attorney are independently elected. The City Council has authority over the police, and it can provide funding for social services—including substance abuse and mental health treatment—that can supplement or provide alternatives to the criminal justice system. But even for these services, the county and the state are the lead funders and providers.

The City Council therefore needs to advocate a coordinated approach to the drug crisis, involving multiple partners, with the City upholding its own responsibilities in the partnership. This can and should be part of the regional response to homelessness that Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan and King County Executive Dow Constantine are championing. Again, though, it is distinct from the housing crisis, even though the two overlap.

The Housing Crisis

[A 2018 study by the consulting firm McKinsey & Company](#) provides perhaps the best synopsis of the region’s housing crisis. As shown in the next two charts from the study, the number of homeless in King

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County is strongly correlated with market rents, and the supply of rental units in King County is dwindling for households below 80% of area median income—particularly for those below 50%. These are the basic facts of our housing crisis.

Exhibit 1 Rent increases in Seattle’s King County show a strong correlation with homelessness.

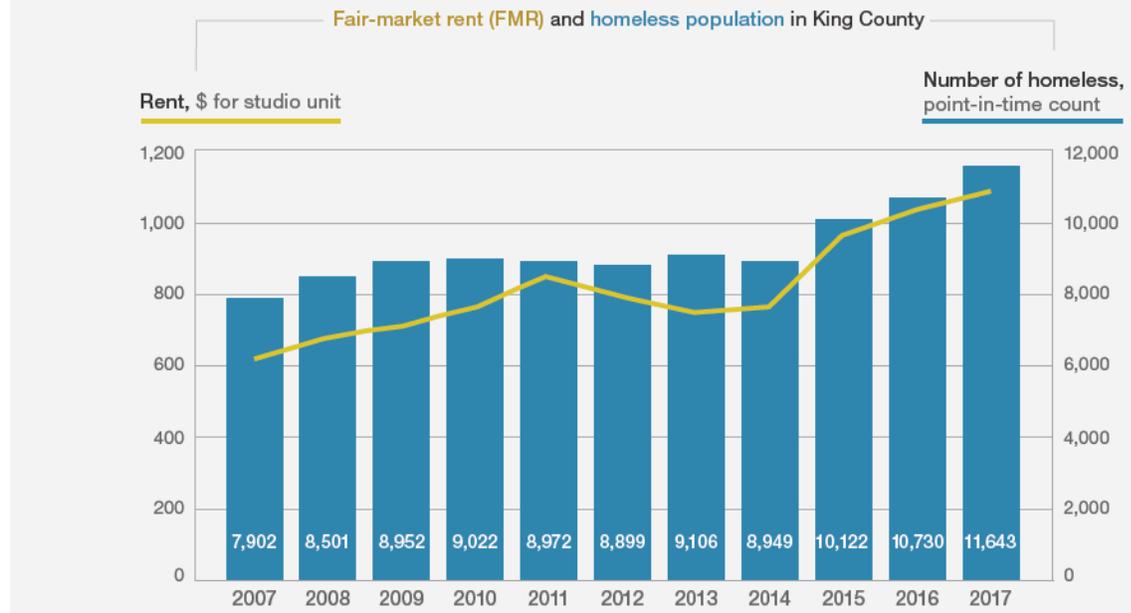
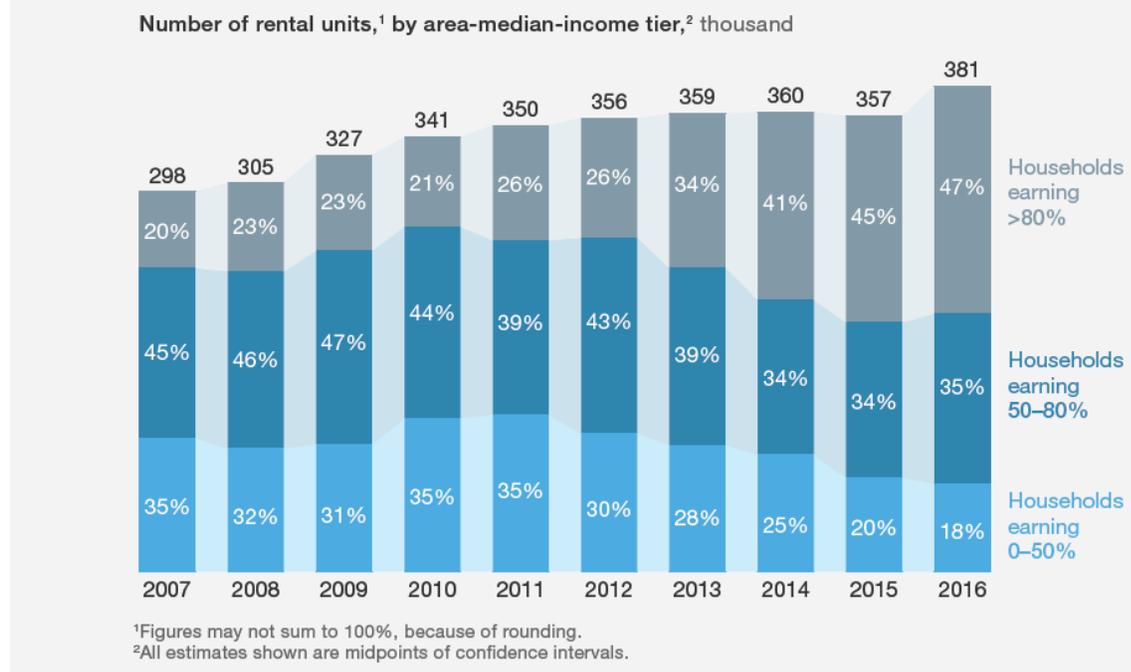


Exhibit 2 Supply of affordable rental units by area-median-income tier in King County



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Homelessness is urgent and worsening (based on King County's [annual count](#) of the number of people without shelter), but it is not a new issue. Tragically, it's been with us since the 1980s, when I worked on it early in my career, for the Mayor of St. Louis. Before that decade, there never had been large numbers of homeless families in every major American city, or large numbers of homeless who were mentally ill, teens or young adults, drug addicts or simply poor people evicted who had nowhere else to go.

A wide range of causes contribute to the national tragedy of homelessness, which the federal government has mostly aggravated rather than alleviated over the last 30+ years. Here's a summary:

- Deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill, ostensibly for community-based treatment, but neither the federal government nor the states have ever funded that remotely adequately;
- Massive reductions in federal funding for low-income housing;
- Federal tax policies, combined with fundamental changes in the economy, which have reduced real earnings for the poor and working class and massively concentrated wealth among the rich;
- Changes in the job market that have dramatically reduced opportunities for those with a high school education or less;
- Huge relative increases in rents and housing prices, with Seattle leading the nation for most of the last five years;
- Changes in zoning laws and housing regulations that virtually eliminated single-room-occupancy hotels and boarding houses, where those down on their luck found shelter in the past;
- The epidemic of opioid abuse over the last decade, and crack cocaine in the first decade of widespread homelessness in the 1980s;
- The severe difficulty for the working poor to afford health insurance, even with subsidies from the Affordable Care Act, and the risks that creates from any serious injury or illness; and
- Domestic violence and the rise in single-parent families, with particularly intense stressors affecting working-class families in recent decades, leading to reduced life expectancies and increases in suicides, drug overdoses, and divorce rates.

Seattle alone cannot solve these problems. Nor can King County, nor can the State of Washington, although the larger the coalition that works together, the more that can be done. Comprehensive, lasting solutions require action at the federal level. Tragically again, there is no reason to expect the federal government to become a newly positive force on these issues anytime in the foreseeable future.

A major part of what Seattle CAN do involves working with the market to provide more affordable housing, as discussed in my separate position paper on that. To summarize, this includes creation of new affordable housing through the recently adopted Mandatory Housing Affordability (MHA) legislation, passage of the Accessory Dwelling Unit (ADU) legislation later this year, and a commitment to implement at least some of the recommendations in the Seattle Planning Commission's "[Neighborhoods for All](#)" report. It also should include passage of new legislation to prevent or mitigate the loss of currently affordable housing that is lost to new development—something that Councilmember Lisa Herbold has promoted through legislation I have testified for, but which Councilmember Juarez has provided little support. In addition, the City needs to continue to create new affordable housing through the Seattle Housing Levy and should work with King County to develop a regional proposal to help fund additional affordable housing across the county. The City should also expand its efforts to prevent people from falling into homelessness.

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In the meantime, however, during the current period of a severe shortfall in affordable housing, the City should provide more large-scale places where the homeless can reside safely and securely, including industrial, “FEMA-style” tent shelters and vehicle camps. A recent [Ninth Circuit court ruling](#) determined that if a City does not have sufficient shelter space, it cannot prohibit homeless people from sleeping outside—although it still can prohibit them from sleeping in particular places. By providing more authorized encampments, we can reduce unauthorized encampments, which have taken over parts of parks, natural areas, sidewalks, and street rights-of-way, despite the City having a [rule](#) in place since 2017 that allows for their immediate removal. Authorized encampments are far more humane than unauthorized ones, as the City can provide sanitation, hygiene, case management and other services. It is much more difficult, if not impossible, to provide these services to unauthorized encampments, which also pose serious safety issues for both their residents and surrounding communities.

Finding sites for authorized encampments will always be a challenge. But if the practical choice is between authorized and unauthorized encampments, I believe we can meet this challenge with political leadership. Councilmember Juarez has proven she cannot provide that. She avoids public debate on controversial issues. She does not attend meetings with community groups. The only meetings for constituents from across her district that she has ever attended were organized and hosted by the group that I helped create, the D5 Community Network. Regarding homelessness, Councilmember Juarez voted for the employer head tax, then provided no explanation when she voted to repeal it less than a month later. She supported the siting of a low-barrier tiny house village in the very location within her district where drug dealing was most concentrated—which was also immediately adjacent to a residential neighborhood—then aggressively dismissed neighborhood complaints about the predictable increases in crime and public disorder that followed.

District 5 needs new leadership to address homelessness, in all its dimensions.