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### Title

Project Homekey and Women's Homelessness: Assessing the Impacts of Housing Interventions

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# Project Homekey and Women's Homelessness: Assessing the Impacts of Housing Interventions

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Photo by Mark Rightmire, Orange County Register/SCNG.

## Background: Women and Homelessness in California

It is well known that California has a housing crisis. However, the crisis does not impact all Californians equally. The number of unhoused women in California has [increased by 50%](#) in the last 8 years, and [women](#) are much more likely to be [housing insecure](#). Pregnant women, single mothers, survivors of domestic abuse, and women of color are especially [impacted](#).

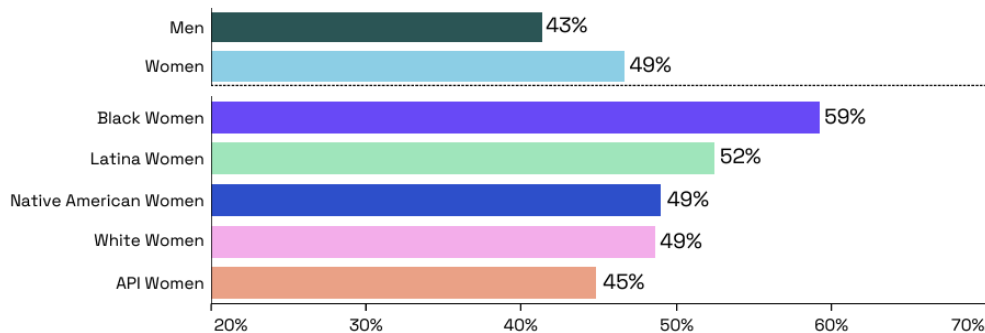
Women's homelessness is shaped by [intersectional factors](#) of racialized, classed, and gendered oppression. Female households and families are systematically [disadvantaged](#) by economic and social structures, such as women's lower wages on average than men, social norms that dictate that women do the bulk of family caregiving, and high costs of childcare. The

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<sup>1</sup> Based at UC Berkeley's Institute of Governmental Studies, the Cal-in-Sacramento Fellowship Program sends approximately 30 Cal students to the state's capital every summer for eight-week public service internships. The Jo Freeman Women in Politics Fellowship supports Cal-in-Sac Fellows whose individual research projects focus on women in politics, including research on public policies that affect women.

time constraints imposed by family care can thus limit women’s opportunities for paid work relative to men; this trend is exacerbated by the fact that women’s lower wages, on average, lead to more precarious economic situations for women than men. These societal barriers and disadvantages have even greater impacts when women are also subject to other intersecting types of discrimination such as those based on race, family status, or immigration status.

### Women in California are More Likely Than Men to Be Struggling to Pay for Housing

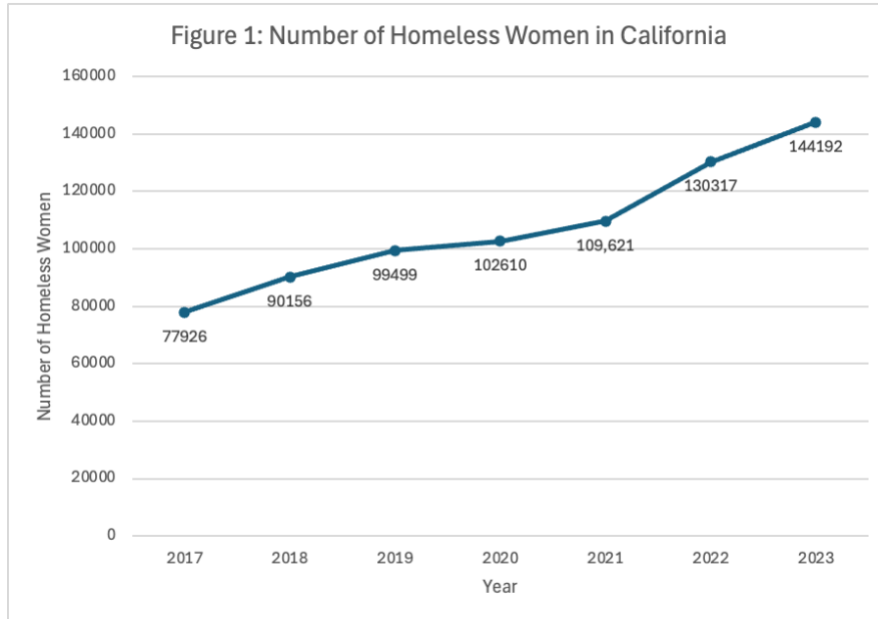


GEPI analysis of ACS 2019.

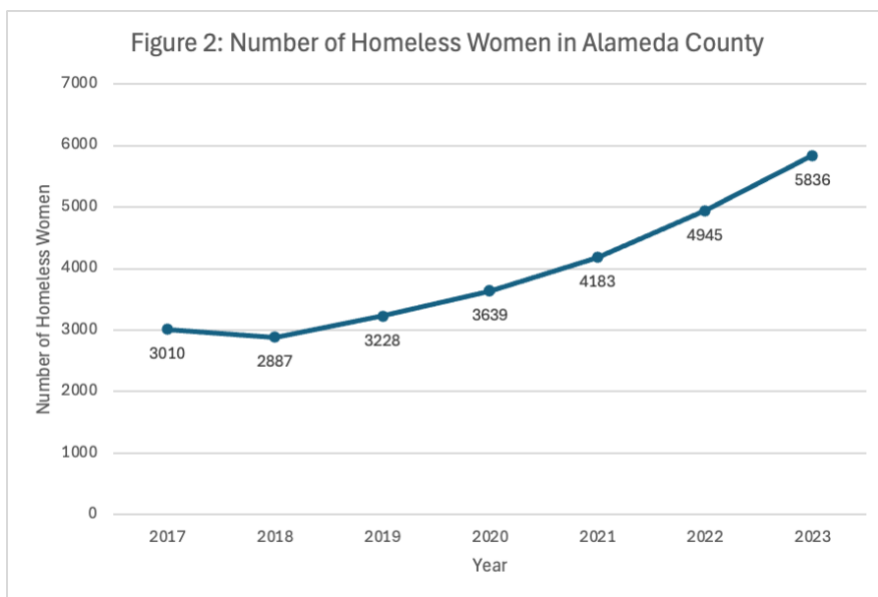
These barriers together contribute to the “[feminization of homelessness](#).” The Gender Equity and Policy Institute’s 2022 [study](#) found that 4 in 10 of the 232,000 unhoused individuals in California at the time of the study were women.<sup>2</sup> They also found that women in California were more likely than men to be rent-burdened, less likely to own homes, and more likely than men to have extremely low income. They found that the housing affordability crisis “converges” with gender inequality to further restrict women’s housing opportunities, reflecting [intersectional factors](#). Domestic violence and the burdens of family life can exacerbate these economic challenges, as shelters can be inaccessible for families even while [domestic violence](#) forces women onto the streets. Experiences of sexual violence are also prevalent among unhoused women. The majority of [unhoused individuals with families](#) in California are women, adding an additional burden.

Both in California overall and in Alameda County, women’s homelessness has been steadily increasing in recent years. In the wake of this increase alongside broader homelessness increases, the state of California has invested unprecedented funding in addressing homelessness. This policy brief seeks to evaluate one state-funded program aimed at funding affordable housing in order to identify where it has been successful and where there is room for improvement in addressing women’s homelessness in Alameda County in particular.

<sup>2</sup> Clott, Alec, and Natalia Vega Varela. “Gender & Housing in California.” Gender Equity Policy Institute (GEPI), 8 Dec. 2023, [thegepi.org/gender-housing-california/](https://thegepi.org/gender-housing-california/).



Data from the [California Homeless Data Integration System](#).



Data from the [California Homeless Data Integration System](#).

### Examining Project Homekey as a Solution

One state-funded program that has received particular attention in recent years is [Project Homekey](#). Launched in 2020, Project Homekey is a “housing-first” initiative by Governor Newsom that provides funding for state, regional, and local public entities to develop a broad range of housing types, including permanent affordable housing, interim affordable housing, single-family scattered site housing, adult residential facilities, and more. Given the particular

intersectional barriers facing unhoused women, I wanted to investigate the “housing-first” strategy funded through Project Homekey as a potential solution.

To investigate the program, I reached out to 7 different sites in Alameda County that received Round 3 Homekey Funding to ask city officials for feedback on the program. Correspondence with these city officials revealed the estimated timelines for the program. As the units have not been constructed yet, the bulk of my analysis came from reviewing Project Homekey documentation such as its program application rubric and Awards Dashboard displaying the number of units funded through the program. Relevant literature is also included in the analysis.

### **Program Benefits**

*Considers gender equity-based principles*

The [rubric](#) for applications incentivizes projects that contain elements policy analysts have recognized as being “[gender-inclusive](#),” such as awarding points for proposals that are near grocery stores or health facilities, community centers/parks, or childcare centers and youth services.

Applicants are also required to formulate plans to provide required supportive services to Homekey residents, including case management, mental health care, benefits counseling and advocacy, housing retention skills, and substance use support.

*Program greatly expands the number of [available housing units](#)*

Round 2 of funding in Alameda County: 6 projects awarded, \$98,121,149 in funding awarded, 332 homes created. Housing units funded in Round 2 included 285 units of permanent housing and 47 units of interim housing.

Round 3 of funding in Alameda County: 6 projects awarded, \$83,304,730 in funds awarded, 303 homes funded. Housing units funded in Round 3 included 274 units of permanent housing and 29 units of interim housing.

### **Program Challenges**

*Bureaucratic slowdown*

The application for funding closed June 28, 2023, and as of June 2024 several projects that I reached out to who had received funding in Alameda County had not started construction yet, with some still awaiting reception of state funding. In San Leandro, construction was slated to begin in July. In Hayward, the project received conditional approval and is not operating yet. In Berkeley, construction had also not begun yet and was expected to finish by late 2024. There are safeguards in the program regulations that require certain checkpoints to ensure continuous progress, but the level of bureaucracy involved does slow the process as described below.

### *Variety of stakeholders involved*

According to an individual at the City of Berkeley: “For each Homekey project there are a variety of stakeholders involved including the developer, property manager and service providers.” In June, the City was waiting for state funds to be released so that they could complete the predevelopment process and start construction of the properties, estimating that units would be completed by the end of 2024. In another demonstration of the variety of bodies involved in developing these projects, the City of Hayward contracted the development and operation of their project out to Bay Area Community Services (BACS).

### **Policy Recommendations**

- Prevention programs
  - Programs to increase housing availability like Project Homekey can be partnered with homelessness prevention programs. In a study evaluating how homelessness programs in California served different populations between 2018 and 2021, 71% of [adults in families served by homelessness programs](#) identified as female, and 23% of people in families were served by homelessness prevention programs compared to 7% of adult individuals. Additionally, 47% were served by rapid rehousing programs compared to 16% of adult individuals. Homelessness prevention programs serving families mainly comprised emergency rental assistance and other short-term financial help. 20% of people in families were solely enrolled in homeless prevention programs during this period, and 69% of people in families were recorded as being housed by the end of the study period, roughly twice the rate for adult individuals. This shows the impact that these programs can have on homeless adults with families – predominantly women – alongside longer-term solutions like Project Homekey.
- Maintain regulations for private companies in public-private partnerships, expand reporting requirements
  - Project Homekey depends on public-private partnerships to carry out the development of Homekey-funded sites. Over 83% of Homekey Projects have a private entity as a co-applicant. However, a [report](#) found that these private entities do not face the same standards to enforce compliance as other public works and may have less experience managing public construction. Contractor violations have emerged on at least five Homekey projects. The total amount of wages and penalties assessed for these five projects was \$1,704,821, while the contractors were held liable for \$1,176,893 in wages owed to aggrieved workers. This could be addressed through legislation requiring these private organizations to be subject to the same regulations as public agencies.