

## ISSUE BRIEF

# California's Older Low-Income Renters Continue to Be Squeezed by Housing Unaffordability and Face a Growing Threat of Aging into Homelessness

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## INTRODUCTION

Across California, in our cities, suburbs, and rural communities, older renters\* are facing a deepening crisis of rent unaffordability. Older Californians living on a fixed income have been unable to keep up with the challenges of rising rents, health care costs, and other basic needs. The temporary relief that was made available during the height of the pandemic helped defray some of these costs, but with the end of the eviction moratorium and other relief measures, California's eviction rates are rising to pre-pandemic levels, and even higher in some communities.<sup>1</sup>

Six out of ten of all older renter households in California face unaffordable rents—and that has not improved in five years. California renters are more likely to struggle to pay their housing costs as they age.

Since Justice in Aging issued its 2021 report on [Older Californians Facing Unaffordable Rents](#), rental costs at the more moderately priced end of the market have continued to increase, becoming even more unaffordable to low-income older adults living on a fixed income. Median California rents currently average \$2,750, 38% higher than the national median.<sup>2</sup> For an individual renter trying to survive on Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits of \$1,183/month, there is no California county where an efficiency apartment is affordable, and 25 counties where the rent exceeds the SSI grant.<sup>3</sup>

*\*"Older renters" and "older renter households" are defined, unless otherwise indicated, as renters age 62 or older, or households where at least one renter is age 62 or older.*

About 6 out of 10 older rental households are rental cost burdened



and 4 out of 10 are severely rent burdened



The lack of enough affordable housing is forcing low-income older Californians to make hard choices about whether to pay their rent or buy food, medicine, or meet other basic needs. It is also the primary driver of the continuing alarming increase in older adult homelessness.

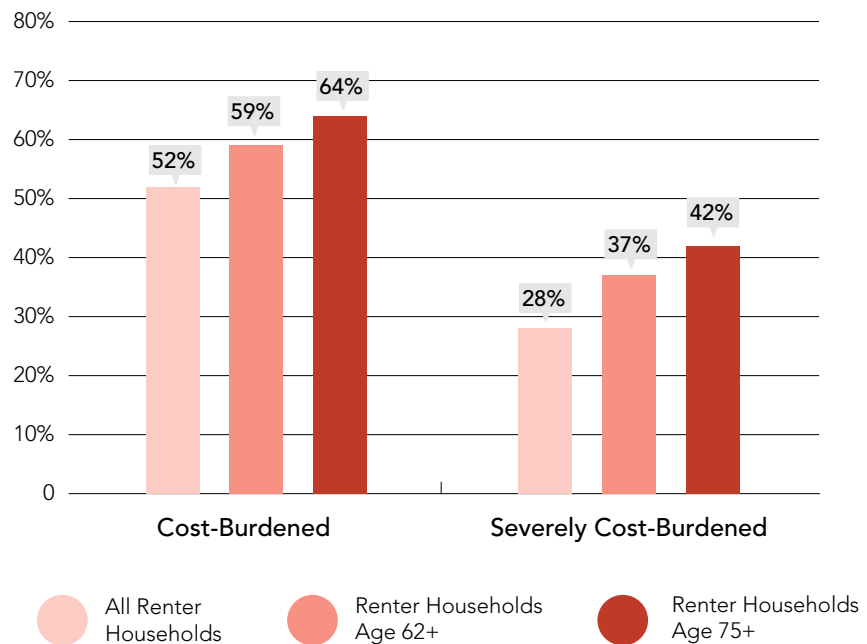
## CALIFORNIA RENTERS FACE INCREASED HOUSING COST BURDENS AS THEY AGE

California renters of all ages are struggling to pay housing costs, but renters are more likely to face unaffordable rents as they age. About 6 out of 10 older renter households are rental cost burdened, and 4 out of 10 are severely rent burdened (see Figure 1 below).<sup>4</sup> One group that is particularly hard hit is women age 75 and older who are living alone. These older female renters are at particularly high risk of housing instability, with 72%<sup>5</sup> rental cost burdened and 51% paying more than half of their income for housing costs.<sup>6</sup> Women in this age group are more likely to have lost their spouse or partner. Older women have also been subjected to a lifetime of reduced earnings due to the gender wage gap and interruptions from the workforce for caregiving. Older women, who are living longer on average than men, are living on a low, fixed retirement income, and have exhausted their savings.

FIGURE 1  
California Renters Are More Likely to Struggle to Pay Housing Costs as They Age

Note: "Cost-burdened" households pay more than 30% of their income for housing; "severely cost-burdened" households pay more than 50% of their income for housing.

Source: Aster Policy Analytics analysis of US Census Bureau, 2022 American Community Survey data.

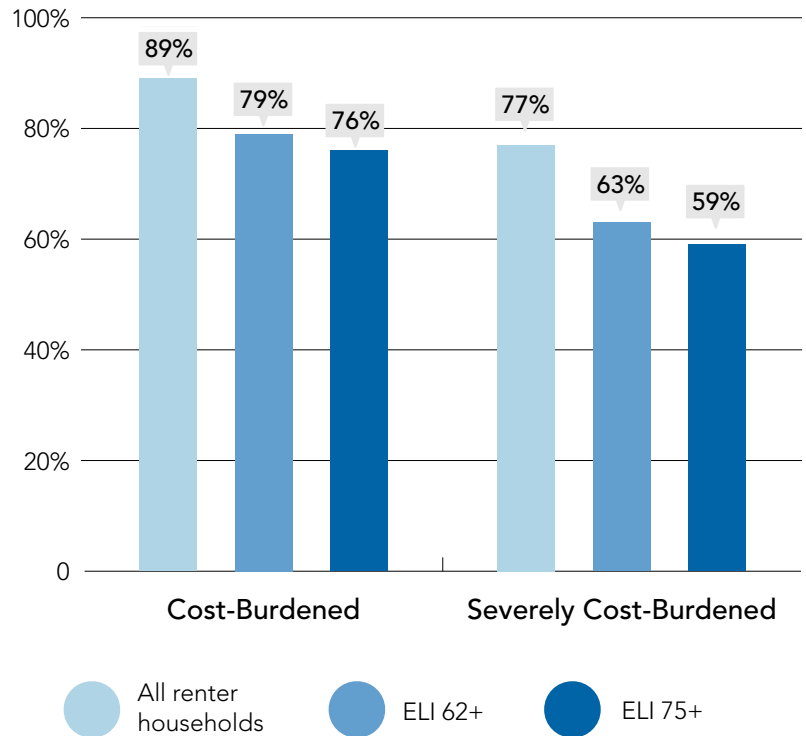


## The vast majority of extremely low-income older renters, disproportionately people of color, face unsustainable rents, driving the surge in older adult homelessness

For extremely low-income older Californians, the rental situation is even more dire. Nearly 8 out of 10 Extremely Low-Income (ELI)<sup>7</sup> older renters struggle to pay rent, with 63% paying more than half of their income for rent (see Figure 2 below).

Nationally, older and disabled renters make up almost half of all ELI renters.<sup>8</sup> Older Black, Latino/a, and Asian American/Pacific Islander renters are much more likely to be extremely low-income, and are also over-represented in who experiences homelessness.

FIGURE 2  
Most of California's Extremely Low Income Renter Households Face Severe Rent Burdens



Older adults who are struggling to pay rent are forced to cut back on health care, food, and other basic necessities.<sup>9</sup> Unaffordable rent burdens and the threat of eviction also negatively affect overall health, with increased risk of depression and anxiety<sup>10</sup> and a host of physical conditions.

## OLDER LOW-INCOME CALIFORNIANS ARE THE FASTEST GROWING AGE GROUP ENTERING HOMELESSNESS, MANY FOR THE FIRST TIME AFTER AGE 50

Increasingly, older renters are reaching a breaking point, entering homelessness for the first time in their lives as they approach old age. Older adults (age 50 and older) are the fastest growing age cohort of people experiencing homelessness in California, and their numbers are expected to continue to grow.<sup>11</sup> A recent statewide study of people experiencing homelessness in California found that:

- **Almost half (48%)** of single homeless adults are age 50 or older;
- **41%** of those older adults had their very first incident of homelessness at age 50 or older; and
- The most common reason for leaving their last home was reduced or lost income that made their **housing unaffordable**.

Significantly, a majority of survey respondents said that a monthly shallow subsidy of \$300 – 500 per month would have made a significant difference in their ability to stay housed.<sup>12</sup>

## The sharp rise in older Californians using homeless services far outpaces their population growth

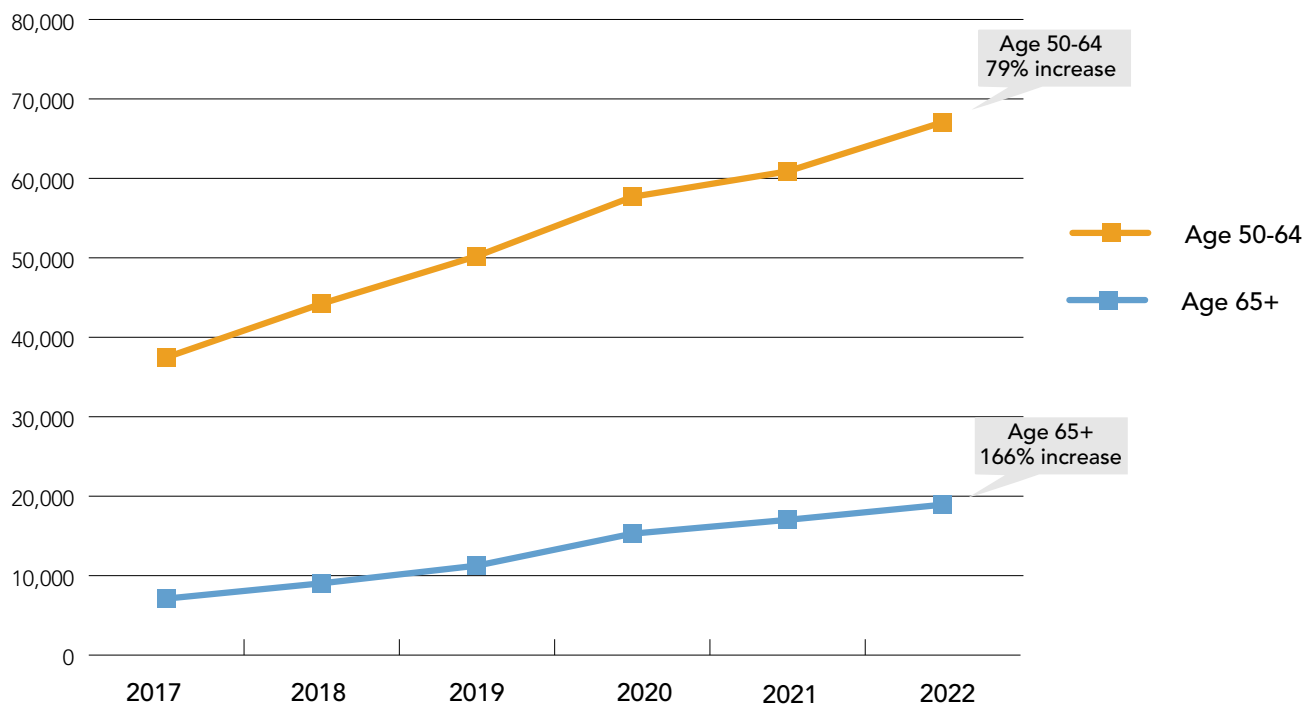
From 2017 through 2022, the number of older Californians (age 50 and older) accessing homeless services has nearly doubled, far outpacing the 4% growth in population for this age group. The largest increase (166%) has been for those age 65 and older.

There are two sub-groups within the older adult homeless population. For those who first experienced homelessness earlier in life and who have struggled with episodes of homelessness throughout much of their adult life, they continue to experience periods of homelessness as they are aging. The second group is comprised of those older adults who are having their first episode of homelessness after age 50. Those Californians who are having their first experience of homelessness after age 50 fit a distinct profile. For this latter group, the primary driver of homelessness is economic—they could no longer afford their housing. Many worked most of their lives in low-wage, physically demanding jobs. They were able to hang on to their housing until there was one destabilizing crisis or emergency.

“  
The apartments they have for seniors, they want three times your security. Well, nobody has that laying around. . . And I lived in a motel for a while thinking I can find me an apartment and move in. Nope. . . . So I ended up here in a shelter, until I could find me a place that I can afford. . . My kidneys are failing, I have a stent in my arm, [I need dialysis] . . . I need a place where I can rest . . . .  
—Marilyn, 61

FIGURE 3  
Number of Older Californians Receiving Homelessness Services from 2017 to 2022

Source: California Homeless Data Integration System



## What are the particular needs of older adults experiencing homelessness?

Older adults experiencing homelessness have a high prevalence of one or more disabilities or chronic health conditions. They are more likely to experience health declines and develop chronic conditions that are typical of a housed person 15-20 years older. They will consequently require more health and social assistive services to obtain and maintain both temporary and permanent housing.<sup>13</sup> Homelessness systems and housing providers need to be responsive to the needs of an aging, increasingly disabled, population.

In California, about three quarters of individuals experiencing homelessness live in unsheltered locations (second only to Hawaii). Californians who are living in their vehicle, tents, or on the streets tend to be older, on average, than those experiencing sheltered homelessness,<sup>14</sup> and they tend to be undercounted in the annual homeless count.

While many older adults would go into a shelter if they could, shelters are often physically inaccessible and do not accommodate their physical and care needs. Many emergency shelters and interim housing sites are not accessible to the older adults with mobility challenges or those needing help with their Activities of Daily Living (ADLs).

## SPECIFIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A key goal of California's Master Plan for Aging is to prevent and end older homelessness.<sup>15</sup> While there have been significant investments in increasing the supply of affordable housing, these investments have not been targeted to older adults. We can make significant progress in preventing and ending older adult homelessness through a combination of targeted prevention, age and disability-tailored homeless solutions, and continued investments in increasing the supply of affordable, accessible housing. These multi-pronged housing policies must be grounded in equity—for owners and renters, for all races, ethnicities, and ages, for those living alone and with multi-generational families, and for justice-involved and LGBTQ+ individuals. Programs that target historically underserved individuals and communities and that address historical and ongoing discrimination will allow us to advance more housing options for all.

### Prioritize evidence-based homeless prevention strategies: rental assistance targeted to older adults at risk of homelessness

Preventing older adults from becoming homeless in the first place is an essential component to ending older adult homelessness. The state should invest in rental assistance targeted to the lowest income seniors at the greatest risk for homelessness. This is a proven and effective homeless prevention strategy.<sup>16</sup> Numerous studies show that a modest rent subsidy of \$300-\$500/month can make a significant difference between holding onto housing and homelessness. Using equity-based targeting, we can use tested predictive factors for those older adults at greatest risk of homelessness.

- San Diego and Stanislaus counties are funding local shallow subsidy programs to prevent senior homelessness before it occurs. They target small monthly payments to those low-income seniors who are facing the highest rental cost burdens and combine the funding with case management, housing navigation, and referral to other needed services.

- The Department of Social Services' Home Safe and Housing Disability and Advocacy Programs provide housing financial assistance to older and disabled adults who are at risk of homelessness, or currently unhoused.

## Leverage housing assistance and supports available through the Medi-Cal program

Recognizing that housing is a key social determinant of health, California has adopted several housing supports and initiatives in its CalAIM (California Advancing and Innovating Medi-Cal) program. CalAIM offers new opportunities to help the growing number of older adults experiencing homelessness get and keep housing. Managed care organizations can help with housing, offering housing navigation services, home accessibility modifications, security deposits and first month's rent, tenancy sustaining services, and short-term post hospitalization recuperative care.<sup>17</sup>

However, older adults experiencing homelessness face barriers to being promptly connected to critical services, such as a housing navigator to assist with applications, documentation, and connecting with available housing. Managed care organizations and service providers also need gerontological training and to provide ways to connect that are not technology-dependent.

We can disrupt returns to homelessness through the Medi-Cal waiver initiatives for people transitioning out of institutions such as nursing facilities, carceral settings, and hospitals. The Justice-Involved<sup>18</sup> and Transitional Rental Assistance (TRA) waivers<sup>19</sup> can connect individuals to health and housing supports sooner and can provide up to six months of rental assistance. California's newly awarded Housing and Services Partnership Accelerator Program presents an opportunity to bridge our housing, health care, and community support systems to address the range of housing options that meet the particular needs of older adults in the most integrated community setting possible.<sup>20</sup>

## Strengthen and enforce protections against rent increases and discrimination; provide legal counsel in eviction proceedings

California has taken steps to protect many renters through the Tenant Protection Act (TPA), setting a maximum on the amount of annual rent increases in covered dwellings, and limiting the reasons justifying an eviction.<sup>21</sup> There are many renters who are not covered by the TPA, and many renters who are not aware of, or able to assert, their legal rights. We recommend the following increased protections:

- Enact **statewide rent protections for mobile homeowners** living in mobile home parks.
- Create **stronger protections** for low-income tenants residing in Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program (LIHTC) properties, including caps on rent increases. **Improve California's LIHTC program rules** to incentivize targeting units for those with the lowest incomes, and those who are experiencing, or at imminent risk of, homelessness.
- **Improve enforcement of state discrimination laws**, especially based on race, source of income and disability.

“

A lot of shelters, they don't have – they're not equipped for disabilities, for handicapped, disabled. You know? They don't have handrails in the showers. They don't have a ramp, you know... the disability can be a problem. They don't accept us in a lot of shelters.

—Participant, California Study of People Experiencing Homelessness

## Reduce barriers to providing and accessing homeless and supportive services to older adults

Through the Master Plan for Aging, California can create stronger connections between Area Agencies on Aging, health care organizations, legal services, and Continuums of Care to ensure that older renters struggling to pay rent or facing eviction are timely connected to needed homeless prevention services and support. Access to legal services for eviction defense is key, ensuring that older renters have legal representation in court.<sup>22</sup>

Many unhoused older adults are unable to use temporary shelters that exclude or do not accommodate people with disabilities, including those who need help with their ADLs. We need to create non-congregate shelter spaces that are age and disability-friendly, where people can be assessed and moved into appropriate permanent housing.<sup>23</sup>

## Continue to increase the supply of affordable and age-friendly housing

The primary cause of homelessness among older adults is a lack of affordable housing, with 24 affordable units available for every 100 eligible Californians.<sup>24</sup> We need targeted investments to increase the supply of deeply affordable and accessible rental housing that can meet the needs of older adults and people with disabilities.

Positive Examples:

- **Housing Works in Los Angeles** provides a range of community-based housing options, from scattered site housing to single site, permanent supportive housing. In-Home Supportive Service (IHSS) workers are embedded at the site and are part of the comprehensive team to serve the needs of residents with ADL or other care needs.
- **[Hope Center and Berkeley Way Apartments](#)** is integrating age-friendly shelter, transitional housing, Permanent Supportive Housing, and 89 units of below market rate housing. On-site support medical and behavioral health services are provided, along with a dining facility.

## CONCLUSION

We must promptly intervene to stop more older adults from being forced out onto the streets, and create integrated housing, health services, and supports that address the particular needs of older Californians experiencing homelessness. The time is now to fulfill the Master Plan for Aging's goal of housing for all ages and stages.

## ENDNOTES

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- 3 Saucedo, Monica, *Inadequate SSI/SSP Grants Leave Californians Unable to Afford Basic Needs*. California Budget & Policy Center, January 2024.
- 4 Households paying more than 30% of their income for housing are considered cost-burdened, and households paying more than 50% of their income for housing are severely cost-burdened. Data source: American Community Survey, 2022, housing cost burden by income category. See Figure 1.
- 5 U.S. Census Bureau. (2022). *Housing Cost Burden for Renter Households in California by Household Type*, Data file B25140. Retrieved from: [https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/tech\\_docs/table\\_shells/2022/](https://www2.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs/tech_docs/table_shells/2022/).
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- 23 Kushel, Margot *et al.*, *California Statewide Study of People Experiencing Homelessness (2023)*. Available at: [CASPEH Report 62023.pdf \(ucsf.edu\)](#) For older adults experiencing homelessness, 38% wanted shelter but were unable to access it. Among those with 3 or more ADL limitations, 53% wanted shelter but were unable to access it.
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