

Access to Water and
Toilet Facilities for
the Unhoused in
Denver



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was only possible because of the participation of Denver's houseless population: Thank you for sharing your daily challenges, your insights, your priorities, and your experiences with us.

It is our hope that this research will contribute to improving the health, safety and dignity of people experiencing homelessness in Denver.

We wish to thank our partners in this research, Housekeys Action Network Denver (HAND), who helped us design and carry out the research. Their outreach team led the surveying effort and helped our students navigate the attendant social and ethical dynamics. A special thanks to Terese, V, Shay, Jerry, Hurricane, Gigi, Keith, Terri, Ana, and Angle.

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Executive Summary

Methodology: This research was conducted from 2020-2023 by students and professors from Regis University and the University Denver in collaboration with the advocacy organization Housekeys Action Network of Denver (HAND). Together we mapped 271 publicly available water fountains and toilets in the City, and conducted 193 surveys and 4 focus groups with unhoused people.

Key findings for bathrooms: 77% of the people surveyed reported finding a bathroom was a challenge. 82% of people living unsheltered did not have bathroom access within 2 blocks. The average time it took people to get to a bathroom was 12 minutes.

- Closed bathrooms: 38% of plumbed park facilities were not open or functioning during normal weekday hours in the summer of 2022. 49% of all park toilets (and nearly all of the plumbed facilities) were seasonal and closed from October through April. Additionally, park toilets were officially closed from sunset to 6 am.
- Inadequate bathrooms: Many bathrooms, especially porta potties, were unclean and missing toilet seats, doors, locks, toilet paper and/or hand washing facilities. Only slightly more than half of all bathrooms had either soap and water or hand sanitizer. 54% had ADA access.
- Coping with the lack of public facilities: Almost half of respondents reported that they must regularly urinate and defecate without any toilet, whether in their tent (using a bag), an outdoor place, or in an alley or dumpster. About one-third regularly use business toilets.
- Gender issues: Women, transgender and gender-nonconforming people face additional barriers when attempting to access toilets, which puts their health and safety at risk. 23% of the open bathrooms did not have functioning locks. Nearly all of the permanent bathrooms lacked gender neutral accommodation. Most seriously, two women we talked to had been raped using porta potties at night.

Key findings for water fountains: 65% of people surveyed reported finding water was a challenge and 67% of people living unsheltered did not have access to a water source within 2 blocks. The average time it took people to get water was 11 minutes. About half of the survey respondents said they did not have enough water for their daily needs. The average amount of water used daily was 10.4 liters.

- Non-functioning and closed: More than half (54%) of all water fountains were not working in the summer of 2022, with that proportion rising to two out of three for water fountains in parks. There were no working water fountains in the outdoor areas of the city where encampments are most common.
- Coping with the lack of public access: 45% used water at shelters, 37% got water at businesses, 25% purchased water, 24% relied on donated water, 15% used private spigots, 9% used public water fountains, and 15% used another source.

Poor WASH access is detrimental to health and well-being: 28% of people surveyed reported a physical health challenge related to poor access to water and sanitation services and 32% reported a mental health challenge.

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INTRODUCTION

Global WASH Insecurity and Measurement

In 2022, 1.9 billion people in the world lacked access to basic sanitation and 1.5 billion did not have drinking water near their homes (UNICEF/WHO 2023), despite the human rights mandate requiring that drinking water as well as sanitation and hygiene facilities are “available, accessible, safe, acceptable, and affordable for all without discrimination” (United Nations 2010). But this is not only an issue for distant, low-income countries; even in the United States, there are more than two million people who lack basic access to drinking water and sanitation (US Water Alliance 2019).

In the U.S, water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) insecurity is determined by race, class, citizenship status, regional geography and housing characteristics (Capone 2020; Deitz and Meehan 2019). However, even the most comprehensive studies of WASH insecurity in the U.S fail to include people experiencing homelessness. This is partly a result of research methodology: the researchers presume home-based WASH facilities, automatically excluding unhoused people from their count (Deitz and Meehan 2019; Portillo 2022).

Global development goals also do not recognize the reality for unhoused people. The Sustainable Development Goal for WASH specifies safely managed services should be available on premise and not shared, thereby excluding people who are unsheltered.

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION



Most people who are unsheltered are achieving the basic level of water access and the limited or unimproved level of sanitation access, (see the service ladders below). Many unsheltered people also do not have a basic handwashing facility, which is also part of Sustainable Development Goal 6.

SERVICE LEVEL	DEFINITION
SAFELY MANAGED	Drinking water from an improved source that is accessible on premises, available when needed and free from faecal and priority chemical contamination
BASIC	Drinking water from an improved source, provided collection time is not more than 30 minutes for a round trip, including queuing
LIMITED	Drinking water from an improved source, for which collection time exceeds 30 minutes for a round trip, including queuing
UNIMPROVED	Drinking water from an unprotected dug well or unprotected spring
SURFACE WATER	Drinking water directly from a river, dam, lake, pond, stream, canal or irrigation canal

FIGURE 14 SDG ladder for drinking water services

SERVICE LEVEL	DEFINITION
SAFELY MANAGED	Use of improved facilities that are not shared with other households and where excreta are safely disposed of in situ or removed and treated off-site
BASIC	Use of improved facilities that are not shared with other households
LIMITED	Use of improved facilities that are shared with other households
UNIMPROVED	Use of pit latrines without a slab or platform, hanging latrines or bucket latrines
OPEN DEFECTION	Disposal of human faeces in fields, forests, bushes, open bodies of water, beaches or other open places, or with solid waste

FIGURE 41 SDG ladder for sanitation services

Source: JMP 2020-2022 WASH report

The UNHCR refugee standards are perhaps a more useful starting place for assessing WASH access (Coalition on Homelessness 2021; Los Angeles Central Providers Collaborative 2017). The post emergency standards for refugee camps mandate that every individual has access to a minimum of 20 liters of safe water per day located within 200 meters of their dwelling with no more than 20 people sharing a toilet and 100 people sharing a water tap (UNHCR 2020). However, these standards set the bar quite low and stop short of assessing whether the facility is safe, comfortable or reliable.

WASH access needs to be:



WASH and the Unhoused

The estimated 582,462 unhoused people in the U.S live in a variety of situations from shelters to the streets, but nearly all lack safe and reliable access to WASH services (Frye, Capone, and Evans 2019; Hochbaum 2020; HUD 2022). This situation is aggravated by public bathrooms and water fountains disappearing from cities all over the country, bathrooms increasingly requiring payment for entry and policies that criminalize homelessness (Hochbaum 2020; Frye, Capone, and Evans 2019; Ballard et al. 2022; Salzman 2017).

Cities criminalize public urination and defecation when people have no private place to carry out these activities, leaving them no other option than to break the law (Hochbaum 2020; Portillo et al. 2022). This fact became especially troubling amidst the COVID-19 pandemic with the number of unhoused people rising in most cities, while at the same time, the WASH services critical to preventing and treating COVID-19 were shut down (Coalition on Homelessness 2021).

**Homelessness
is not
a crime.**

Source: Action Network

Apart from the present study, there have been only a couple of studies in the U.S of public WASH facilities. A water access survey in San Francisco conducted with 73 unhoused people found that 68% of respondents faced barriers in accessing their daily water needs (Coalition on Homelessness 2021). A majority of respondents (60%), didn't have access to even 15 liters of water per day, the result of barriers such as cost, distance, and policing through institutional or social means.

In Los Angeles, a collaborative group of non-profits conducted an audit of public toilets and found that Skid Row fails to meet even the UNHCR standards for refugee camps (Los Angeles Central Providers Collaborative 2017). At night, only nine public toilets were available for 1,777 unsheltered people and these were largely unacceptable. Even during the day, Skid Row was short of the standard by 164 public toilets. The audit also revealed that many of the toilets were "frequently inoperable, poorly maintained and inaccessible" (p.9).

Some emerging research shows the health consequences of poor WASH access for people experiencing homelessness in the United States (Ballard et al. 2022; Portillo et al. 2022; Frye, Capone, and Evans 2019). A range of personal and public health consequences follow from the lack of water and toilets. In the Skid Row study people commented that they couldn't wash their hands before eating, and one person reported that "lack of toilet access degrades appearance, [as well as] feelings of self-worth, [and] physical and mental health" (Los Angeles Central Providers Collaborative 2017 p.41).

The conditions of living on the street, including malnutrition, exposure to harmful weather conditions and poor hygiene practices, exacerbate health risks from communicable diseases (Portillo et al. 2022). Skin infections, Hepatitis A, and diarrheal diseases are linked to poor WASH and commonly experienced by unhoused people (Portillo et al. 2022; Frye, Capone, and Evans 2019; Capone et al. 2018).

A study in Atlanta suggests that open defecation is common and poses health risks to the unsheltered and the general public (Capone et al. 2018). Access to WASH for people experiencing homelessness is critical to preventing infectious disease outbreaks such as SARS-CoV-2 and Hepatitis A (HAV) (Frye, Capone, and Evans 2019; Ballard et al. 2022).

Homelessness and WASH in Denver

The annual point-in-time (PIT) count conducted in the Denver Metro Area in January of 2022 revealed 4,794 people experiencing homelessness in the City and County of Denver (MDHI 2023). Of those located and counted, 2,078 individuals were staying outdoors (MDHI 2023). This single number provided by the PIT survey, however, underestimates the number of people experiencing homelessness throughout the year, which was likely closer to 28,000 in the Metro Area (MDHI 2022).

Compared to the 2020 study, rapidly rising housing and rent prices and the economic insecurities of the COVID-19 pandemic had contributed to a 40% increase in the number of people accessing emergency shelter as well as a 99% increase in the number of people newly experiencing homelessness (MDHI 2022).

Denver municipal policies make life without housing very difficult. The City has criminalized vehicle residency, camping outside and public urination and defecation. The 2012 Camping Ban made it unlawful to camp or create any type of shelter on public property. This regulation allows the City to conduct their “sweeps” (or in the language of activists “traumatic displacements”) of homeless encampments, which they pursue three times a week, without providing any accompanying aid or services (Robinson and Westbrook 2019). The sweeps are supplemented by continuous commands to “move on” from city enforcement teams.

In fact, the City’s sweeps disrupt service access, sever community networks, and aggravate mental and physical health challenges (Robinson and Westbrook 2019). No services (trash, water, showers, or sanitation) are provided to the encampments, and facilities set up by non-profits have been systematically removed. The City justifies the sweeps from a public health perspective, blaming poor hygiene and sanitation on the unhoused themselves, rather than the lack of services they can access (McCormick-Cavanagh 2021). The City’s push for affordable housing is a long-term solution, but it neglects the immediate health and well-being of those living on the streets (Coalition on Homelessness 2021).

Businesses in Denver have been increasing restrictions and denying restroom access since at least 2018 over concerns about crime and drug use (Garrison 2018). At the start of the COVID pandemic, the City closed bathrooms and water fountains while providing some handwashing stations. Yet, even as life has somewhat normalized, many facilities have yet to reopen to the public. Many of the public buildings, such as libraries and recreation centers, continue to operate on restricted hours, while permanent facilities have been replaced by porta potties or left abandoned.

Comments from interviewees reflected their perception that the City was deliberately searching for a way to shut them out:

“Everyone used the pandemic as an excuse to not clean, but close them [bathrooms], or make them member only. They will say it is not a public bathroom, but then let five other people through. It’s illegal, if it’s not a private club we should be able to access the toilet unless it’s down for repair.”

Public health experts and local advocacy organizations have stressed that the city needs to do more to provide water and toilets to unhoused individuals living on the streets (Heitz 2021). However, in 2022, in spite of passage of a bond measure that could help fund more park restrooms, the City Council voted down all budget amendments related to upgrading or increasing the water and sanitation facilities.

Lacking public restrooms, people experiencing homelessness often use outdoor spaces like the city’s waterways as a last resort. E. Coli contamination levels (a proxy measurement for fecal matter) in the Platte River were reported 137 times higher than the federal limit in 2021 (Finley 2021). The City failed to meet Mayor Hancock’s goal to make the Platte River swimmable by 2020 (Estabrook 2022). According to Jon Novick, who manages the Denver health department’s water quality monitoring programs: “We’ve been monitoring the water quality for years and E. coli levels, they really haven’t changed, despite everything that this city has done.” However, the one thing the city has not done is increase the number of public toilets.

METHODOLOGY

This mixed methods study was conducted primarily during two community-based research courses with students and professors from Regis University and the University of Denver between 2020-2023. The Denver-based advocacy organization Housekeys Action Network Denver (HAND) assisted with the design of this research and led the surveying effort.

271 publicly available water fountains and toilets mapped

193 surveys conducted with unhoused people

5 focus groups conducted with unhoused people



Student conducting a survey with an unhoused person at their tent.



Image credit: HAND

Mapping

In the summer of 2021, we conducted the first-ever inventory of all public water fountains and bathrooms in Denver. 271 total facilities were mapped initially and updated in 2022. The data was documented in [Google My Maps](#) and made publicly available.

At each facility, students marked the location and assessed its conditions.

The survey on bathrooms noted the type/ location of toilet (plumbed facility, porta potty, library toilet, government building toilet), and whether it had locking doors, ADA accessibility, lighting, toilet paper, soap or hand sanitizer, and running water. The survey also noted the facility's cleanliness, the hours open, seasonal closures, and security restrictions.

The survey on water fountains noted whether or not the fountain was functioning, seasonal closures, whether it was accessible from the outside or inside, whether it could fill up a water bottle, and the level of cleanliness.



Student adding a broken water fountain to the map.

Surveys and Focus Groups

In 2022, we worked with HAND to conduct 193 surveys with people who are unhoused. Members of the HAND outreach team who were currently or previously unhoused worked closely with students and faculty to design, test, conduct, and interpret the surveys. The outreach team also trained the students and faculty in how to approach and talk to research participants in a safe and respectful manner.

The surveys consisted of 60 questions (including eight that were open-ended) about peoples' experiences, priorities and perceptions of access to drinking water, showers, and toilets in Denver.

Verbal consent was provided by all participants and no personal identifying information was collected. Each participant was given a \$10 grocery store gift card upon completion of the survey. The survey data were analyzed in SPSS. Following the initial descriptive statistics, we explored possible differences between groups by living arrangement, gender, race and sexual orientation.

Four focus groups were conducted at Safe Outdoor Spaces (SOS) sites, a City-sanctioned, semi-permanent type of tent camp, managed by Colorado Village Collaborative. These SOS sites provided residents with basic security and facilities, which allowed them more time to engage in this research. The focus group size ranged from 4-12 people.

One additional focus group was conducted following a HAND community meeting with members of the unhoused community.

The audio for each of these focus groups was recorded with participants' permission and later digitally transcribed.

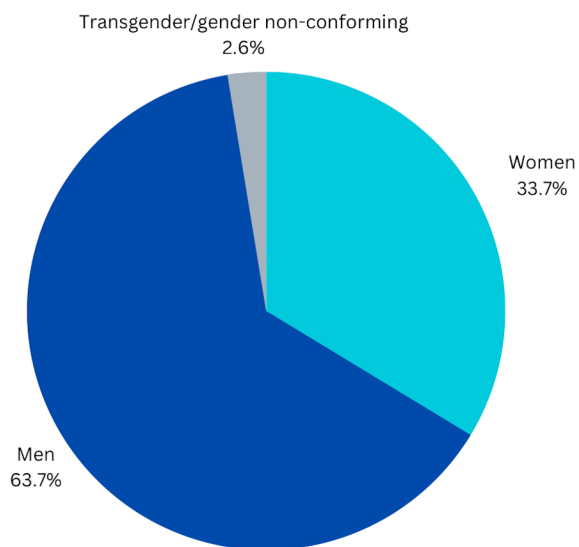
The focus group questions were open-ended and encouraged participants to discuss their experiences with water, restrooms, and hygiene and any related challenges arising from their specific identities.

Each focus group participant consented to be part of the research and was given a \$20 grocery store gift card.

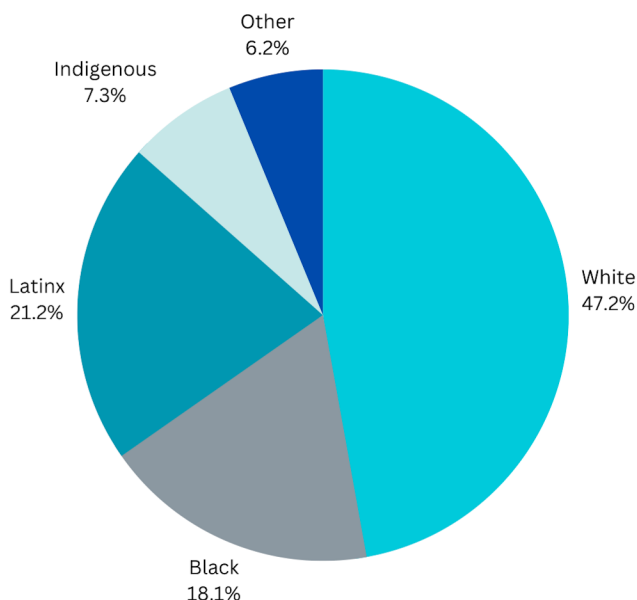
SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

Of the 193 people we surveyed, 57% were staying outside (unsheltered), either in tent encampments or on the street, while another 25% were staying in local shelters. A smaller number lived in SOS or tiny home sites (6%), their vehicles (6%), hotels or transitional housing (4%) or with friends or relatives (2%). All participants were over 18 years of age. The median age of respondents was 45 years old. The youngest person surveyed was 21 and the oldest was 77.

Most of the people surveyed identified as men and just over one-third identified as women. Three people identified as transgender, one as non-binary, and one as an intersex woman.



More than half of our survey respondents identified as people of color, roughly representing the racial breakdown in the City of Denver where 46% of people identified as people of color.



Compared to their overall percentage in Denver, Black or African American people and Indigenous people are overrepresented in our survey, while LatinX people are underrepresented.

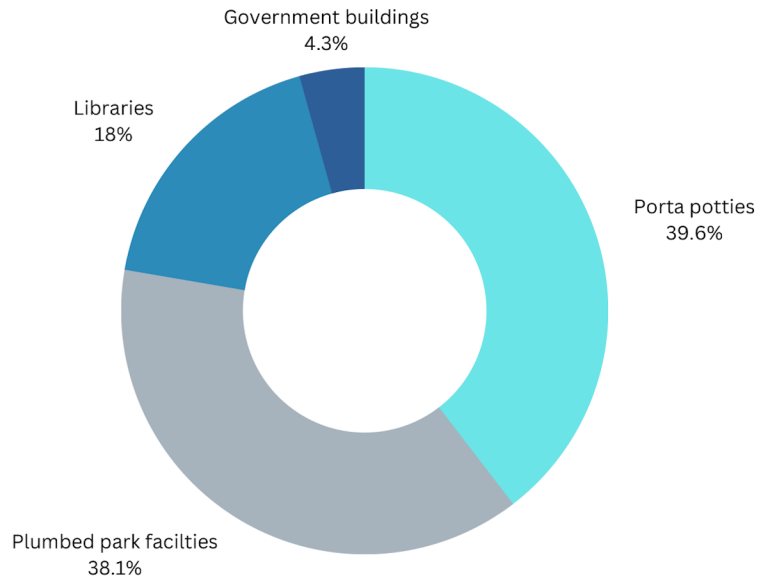
Almost half of our participants said they had a physical disability (43%) and reported ailments that included arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, broken bones, Parkinson's Disease, blindness, COPD, stroke, chronic pain, and cerebral palsy.

MAPPING WASH IN DENVER

The mapping data illustrate an insufficient number of water points and toilets in the City, especially in areas where homeless encampments are common.



Scan this QR code to gain access to the Google Map



An example of a closed plumbed bathroom replaced by a porta potty at Rude Park. The photo was taken during the summer, even though the plumbed facility says that it is only closed seasonally.

49% of all park toilets (and nearly all of the plumbed facilities) were seasonal and closed from October through April.

A significant percentage (38%) of plumbed park facilities were not open or functioning during normal weekday hours in the summer of 2022.

Additionally, park facilities are officially closed from sunset to 6 am.

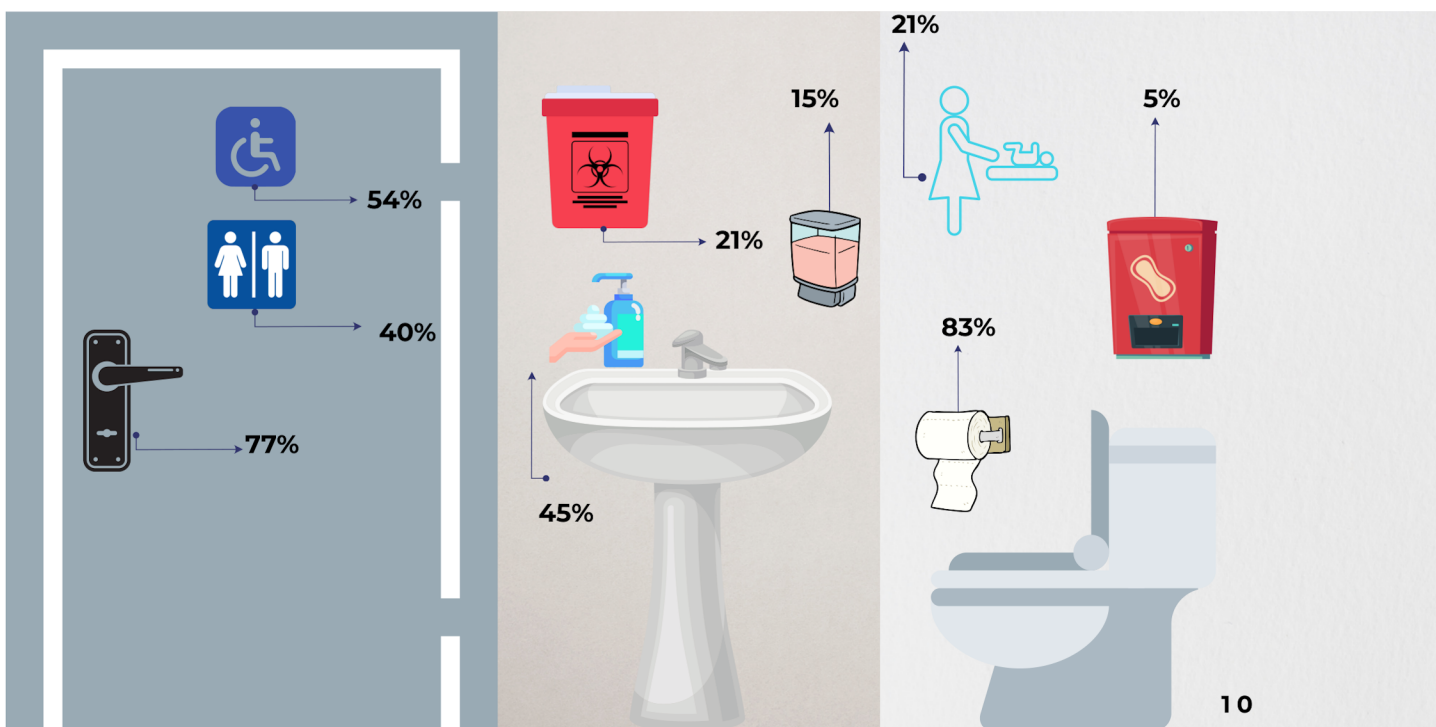
Cleanliness was a major problem, especially in the porta potties, where facilities were overflowing, had visible feces, trash, toilet paper and/or urine on the floor.

The photograph on the right was taken during our mapping research. This was not an uncommon bathroom condition in Denver where many public restrooms lacked important features such as toilet paper, soap, a locking door, or even toilet seats. In fact, only slightly more than half of bathrooms had either soap and water or hand sanitizer. All but two of the child changing stations were located in library bathrooms. The only gender neutral bathrooms were porta potties.



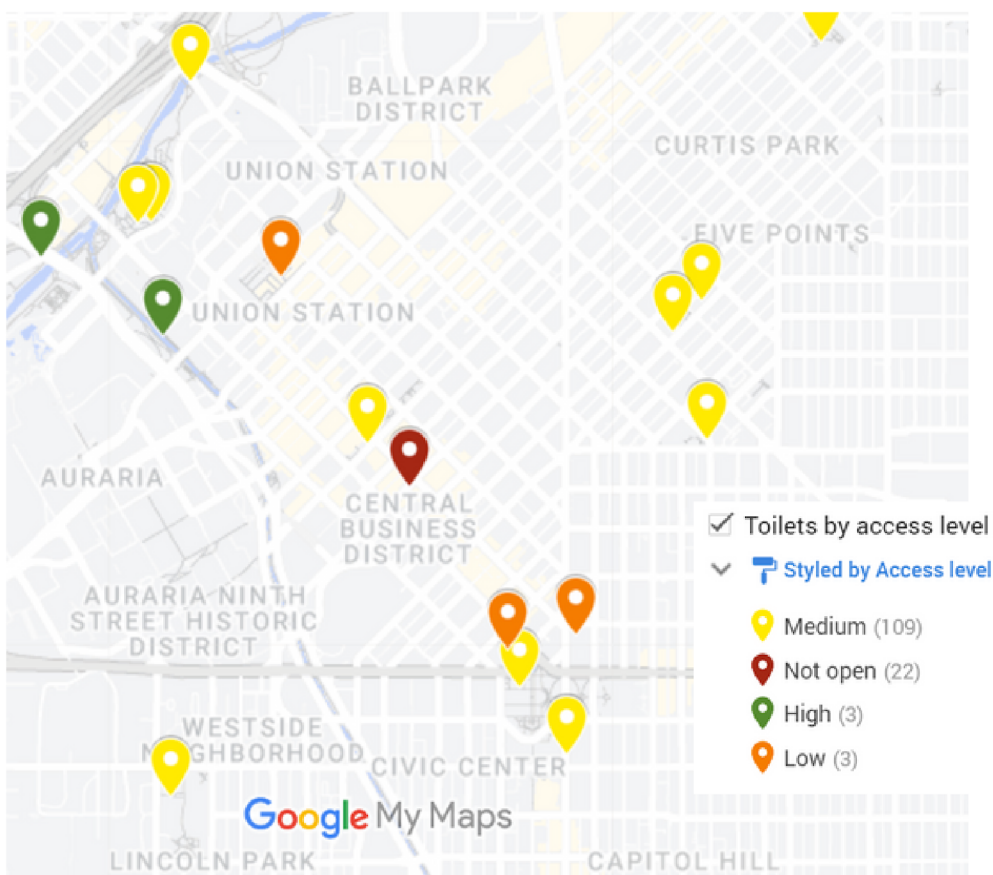
Vandalized porta potty in Denver.

The graphic below illustrates what percentage of all toilets had each feature. Characteristics of a quality public bathroom would include all of these features that are otherwise unavailable or rarely available in public restrooms throughout the City.



The maps showed that the few bathrooms that were reliably clean and comfortable were located in public buildings, most notably libraries. Unfortunately, libraries had short hours and were closed on Sundays and most holidays. Libraries were also closed for a full year during the height of the COVID pandemic (from March 2020-March 2021) and the main downtown public library was closed for repairs from and continued to operate on reduced days and hours open.

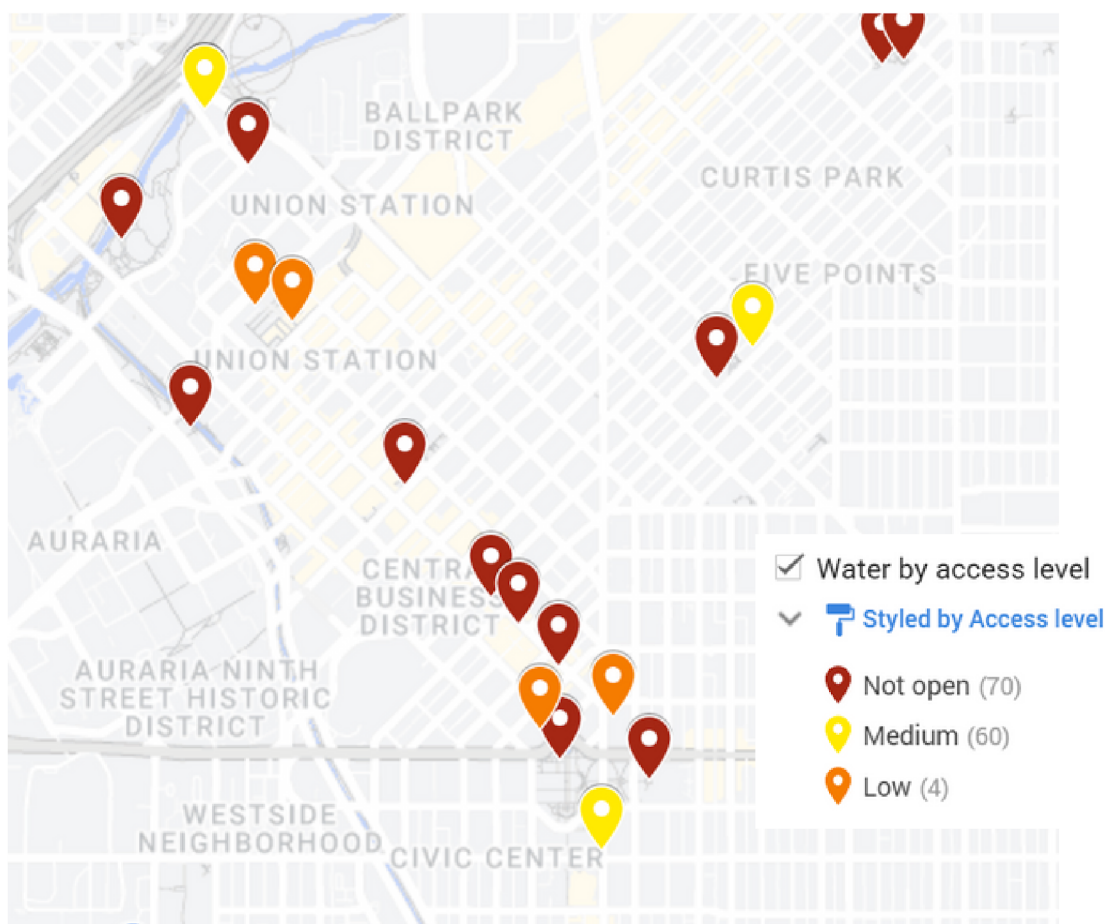
Toilets in other public buildings like the Webb building were officially open, but required security screening to enter, making most houseless people uncomfortable using them. Toilets located at the RTD station and Union station were similarly difficult for the unhoused to access and they often faced discrimination and exclusion at these sites.



The map above illustrates bathrooms available in the main neighborhoods where unhoused people stay and spend time. In these areas there are only 16 open toilets. Only 2 of these, which are porta potties located outside of parks, are open without any restrictions 24/7 (green). 11 of the 16 are located in libraries or parks that are either closed seasonally and/or at night (yellow). The remaining 3 bathrooms (orange) are only open to paying customers and actively restrict access for the unhoused (Union Station, the Webb building, and RTD).

The map of water fountains shows 134 fountains, 79% of which are located in parks, while the rest are found in the same libraries and public buildings noted for bathrooms. More than half (54%) of all water fountains were not working in the summer of 2022 and the same was true of two out of three water fountains in parks. (Note that just before the publication of this report, the City claimed to open access to 125/133 water fountains). More than half of the fountains did not have enough water pressure or space beneath the water stream to fill up a water bottle.

All park water fountains were closed seasonally from roughly October to April. There were no working water fountains available where encampments are most common. There were no water fountains on the major trails, Cherry Creek and South Platte River, that were popular with unsheltered people, as well as bikers and runners.



The map above illustrates the water points available in the main neighborhoods of the City where unhoused people stay and spend time. There were only 7 functioning water points in these areas, and all of them had some access barriers. The fountains coded with a medium (yellow) level of access were located in libraries or parks, which were closed seasonally and at night. The fountains coded as low (orange) were difficult for the unhoused to access due to security restrictions or a requirement that the user be a paying customer.

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS' PERSPECTIVES

Everyone had desperate stories of having no place to go when they were in need of a toilet.



almost 1/2 people have to "hold it" every day to find a bathroom



for almost 2/3 people finding water was a challenge



for more than 3/4 people finding a bathroom was a challenge



"No public restrooms are available anywhere. It is real frustrating. Eventually you come to a point when you don't care because you have to go and don't have nowhere to go. You go in the bushes. It's embarrassing."

The above image is a sign from a Natural Grocers on South Broadway. The image on the right is from a McDonald's on South Broadway. Not only are businesses barring people from using their restrooms entirely, there are restrictions in place to specifically prevent unhoused folks from using their facilities.



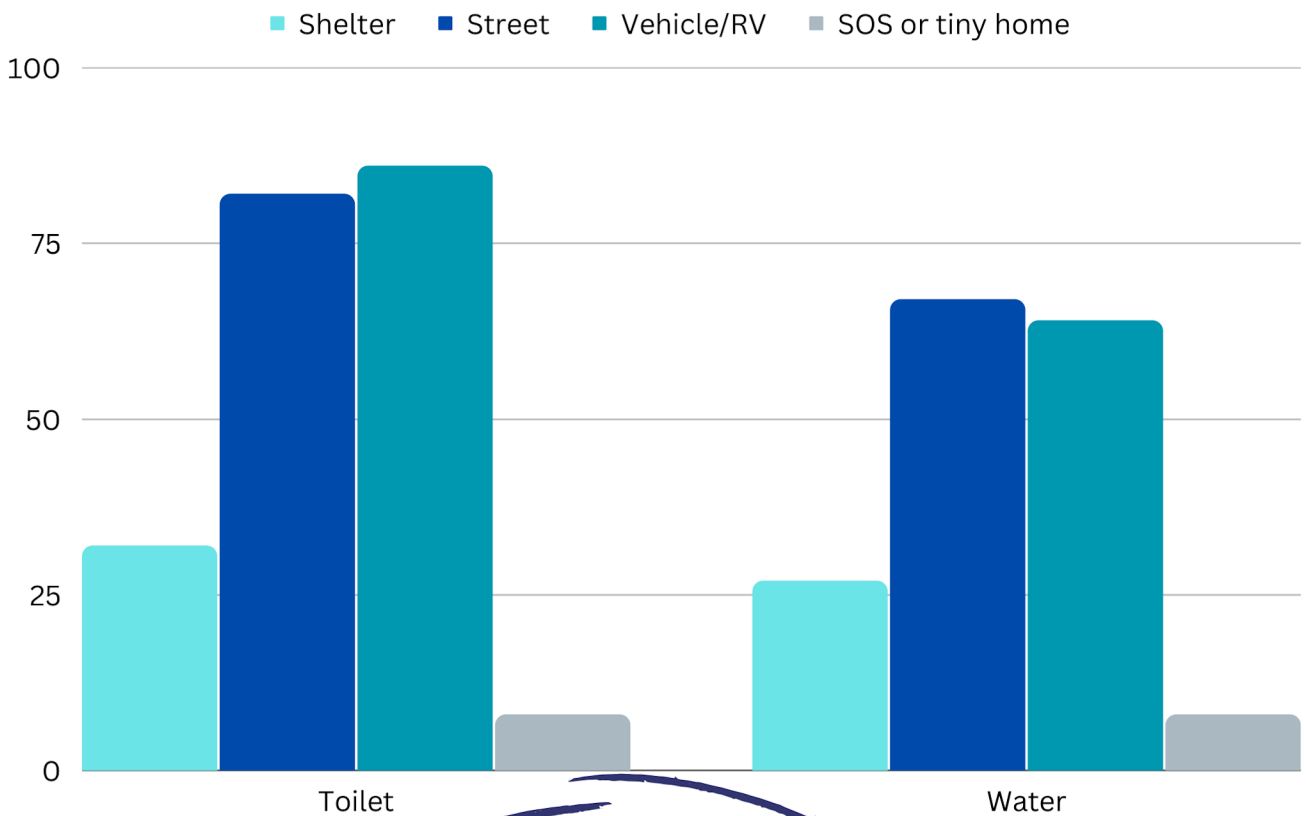
67% of people living on the street did not have reliable access to drinking water within 2 blocks.

The average time it took someone living on the street to get to a water source was 11 minutes.

82% of people living on the street did not have reliable access to a bathroom within 2 blocks.

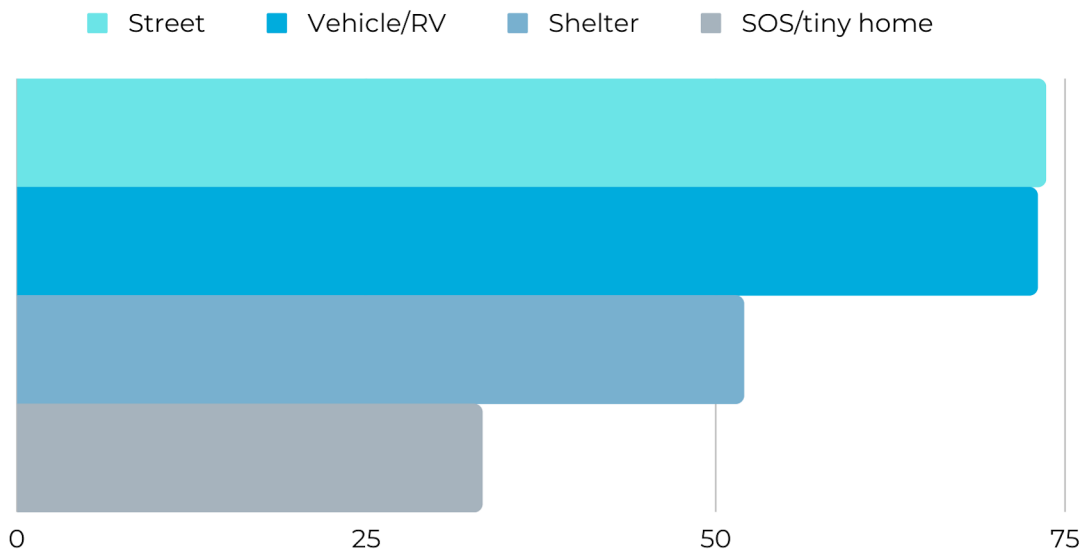
The average time it took someone living on the street to get to a bathroom was 12 minutes.

% of people reporting not having reliable access to drinking water or a toilet within 2 blocks by living arrangement



86% of people living in vehicles/RVs reported not having reliable access to a bathroom within 2 blocks

% of people reporting they always or sometimes have challenges finding water by living arrangement



Most of the unhoused people we asked about using a public water fountain laughed or exclaimed with exasperation that there were none.

Lacking consistent access to water, people used small quantities from different sources. About half of the survey respondents said that they didn't have enough water for their basic needs and could use more water for drinking, showering and doing laundry.

The average amount of water used by survey respondents in a day was 10.4 liters, far below even the minimum 20 liters recommended for refugee settlements.

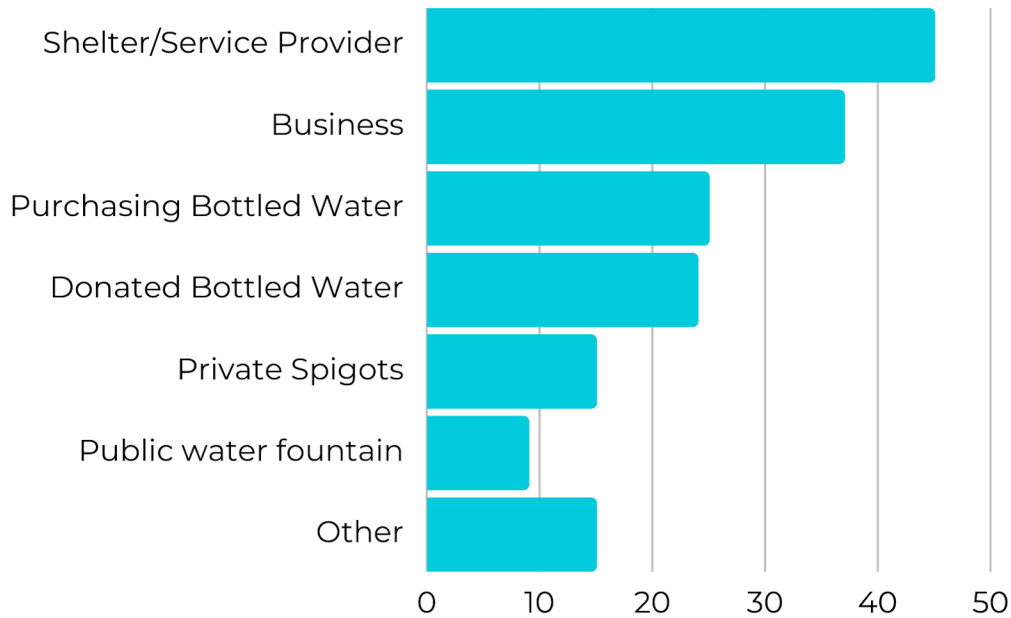
"...finding a reliable, consistent source of water is impossible, and then when I do have access to a spigot, I almost get the cops called on me for just trying to access water and survive."



A man walking to collect water. People who stored water for later use either used small plastic water bottles (38%), gallon jugs (32%), reusable water bottles 28% or another type of container (12%).

Use of multiple water sources

% of people reporting using water from each of the following sources (multiple responses permitted)

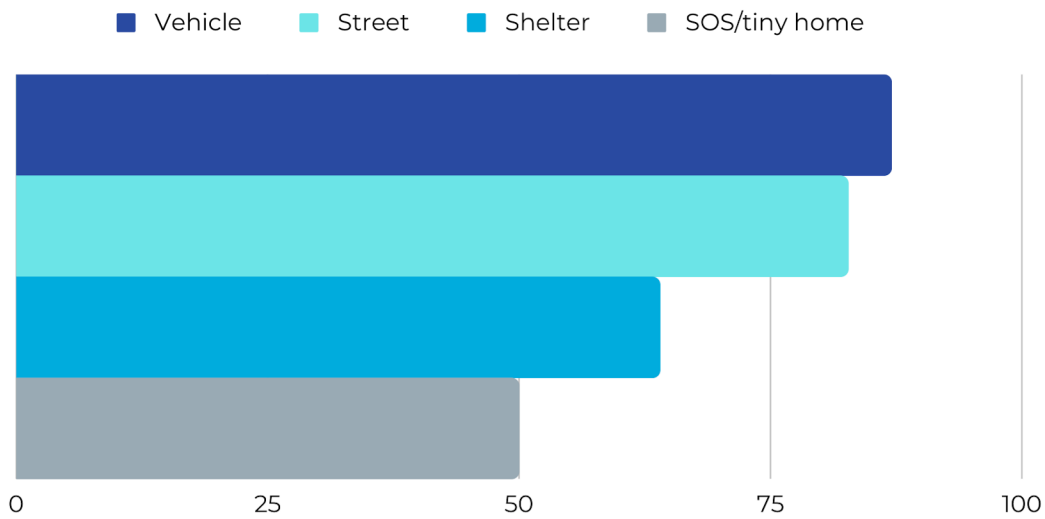


Shelters or service providers supplied water to the greatest percentage of people, followed by businesses. Only 9% of people used public water fountains. On average people paid \$3.40 for water per day, although about one third paid nothing.

Some people noted that they had established relationships with staff at certain establishments that allowed them to use the toilet or fill up water bottles inside or at private spigots. "I use private spigots," one man replied, "Some people are really nice, they let me fill up." One woman said that churches and even a few private residences allowed her to fill up her 5 gallon bucket from their spigot. A few people talked about fashioning their own "water keys" to open private spigots.

"Not being able to pay for the water...you are not supposed to charge for water. But most places charge \$1 or \$2 for a cup of water and you just can't pay for that."

% of people reporting they always or sometimes have challenges finding a bathroom by living arrangement



“Everyone knows that the park bathrooms are the worst, the most filthy in the City. You don’t have parents bringing their kids in there.”

“The bathroom at the shelter is not comfortable or private. They don’t even have stalls. Just toilets lined up next to each other.”

Bathrooms were hard to find, often closed, or controlled by gatekeepers.

Although people staying in shelters had better access to water and bathrooms, they were generally not satisfied with the toilets provided. Shelters also had limited hours and residents were often left without water or bathroom access when they closed.

The porta potties provided at the SOS sites gave residents access all day and night and were cleaner and safer than other bathrooms in Denver.

Coping with the lack of bathrooms

When formal WASH facilities were not available, people made do with makeshift facilities or an outdoor site. **Almost half of respondents (46%) reported that they must go to the bathroom without any facility: in their tent (in a bag), an outdoor place, an alley or a dumpster.** Several people described urinating in local rivers or digging holes to bury their excrement.

Only 7% of people reporting using permanent park bathrooms, while 43% used shelters, 32% used businesses, 31% used porta potties in parks, 19% used porta potties at construction sites, and 15% used government buildings, primarily libraries.

Unhoused people consistently mentioned some businesses known to have more friendly bathroom policies: Starbucks, King Soopers and 7-11 were the most popular. McDonald's, Walmart, and some gas stations and grocery stores were also mentioned. These bathrooms were perceived as relatively clean and people were not harassed trying to gain entry, even if they required you to buy something first.

"Do you know why people are using the bathroom in the alleys and next to somebody's car? Because they have to go so bad that they have to drop them right there. Yeah. They're not going until they have to. They try to find somewhere to go, but when they can't, they have to drop there so that's how it goes. That's why and then they're blamed for it."

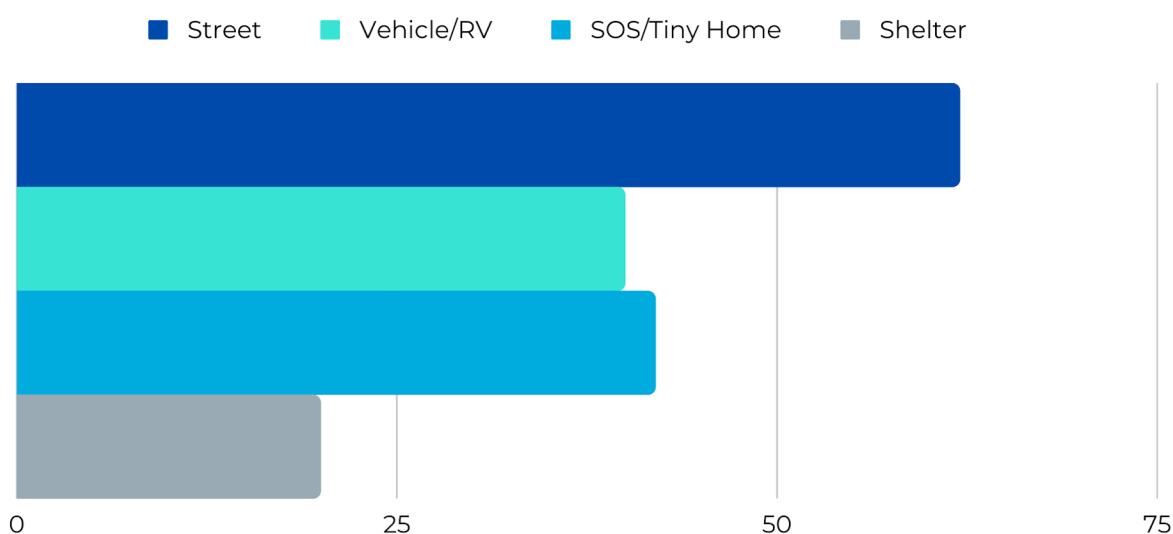


Communal water source managed by camp residents.

Some people living on the street and in encampments craft their own makeshift toilet facilities or share Luggable Loo portable toilets. In some cases encampments also constructed and shared communal water supplies.

"I go wherever I can. I will put a blanket over me when I go. I will shit in a King Soopers bag and throw it in the river."

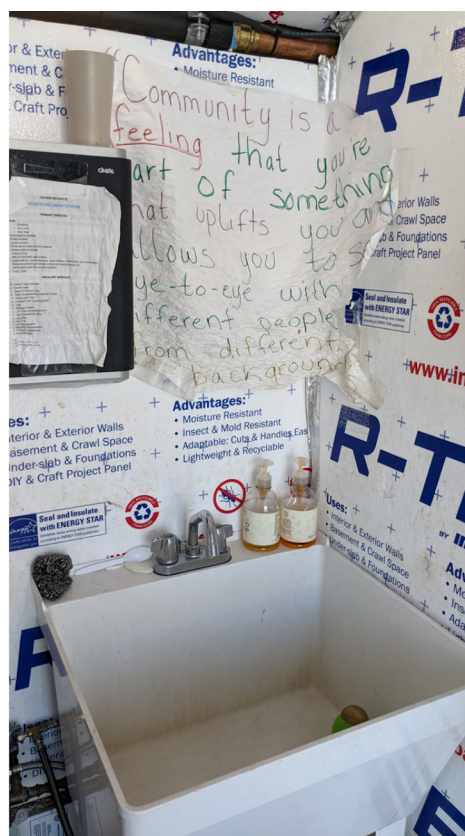
% of people who said finding a shower is difficult by living arrangement



62% of people living on the street found it difficult to find a shower.

Showers are another critical piece of the WASH infrastructure that is necessary for personal hygiene, health and well being. For unsheltered people, and people staying in vehicles or at SOS sites, access to a shower was particularly challenging.

At SOS sites, showers were only provided once a week and if residents missed the designated time or there was a holiday, they had to wait another week. In two of the focus groups, residents also noted the smell of the greywater container and the lack of water temperature regulation.



Handwashing station at SOS site.

Physical Health & WASH

Inadequate WASH access has far ranging negative impacts on health and well-being. Based on our survey data, **28% of the unhoused population reported a physical health challenge** related to poor access to WASH services. The health issues reported included skin infections, UTIs, bladder infections, stomach issues, Hepatitis A, teeth/dental problems, heat stroke, and dehydration. The lack of WASH services compounded other health issues, since people were left without reliable clean water to take pills, clean wounds and keep themselves clean.

“

“I get yeast infections from holding it so much. (I have) never felt so much pain in my life.”

“It’s hard to shower, it’s hard to get drinking water. It’s not good for your liver, my urine is just super dark.”

”

One individual had peers who were incontinent due to the stress put on the body, from having to always “hold it.”

Mental Health & WASH

Mental or emotional issues related to poor access to WASH services were reported by 32.1% of respondents.

Among those concerns most frequently mentioned were anxiety, stress, fear, and depression. Lack of WASH services also aggravated existing mental health issues. The loss of dignity and embarrassment also took its toll. Being forced to use the bathroom in unsafe, unsanitary places without privacy was dehumanizing and brought up feelings of shame and humiliation for people we spoke with.

“

"I get so upset when I have to hold it. I'm almost in tears. It stresses me out a lot."

"[It makes me] want to stop existing"

"I feel like I am not human."

”

"Not having a place to go feels disgusting, like [I am] an animal."

THE STIGMA AROUND HOMELESSNESS IMPACTS MENTAL HEALTH.

From NAMI.

One indigenous man spoke of a heart condition he has that requires him to take pills with a diuretic effect. “Yeah, I’m always using the bathroom, but there’s places I can’t go in, they won’t let me use the bathroom. So there were times you know urine backs up it could kill me. So yea if I need to use the bathroom, I gotta go.” He laughed uncomfortably and said,

“nobody cares.”

One man shared that he feels, “depressed to not even be able to keep clean” and is impacted by “people looking down on (him) for being dirty.” Another interviewee stated, “Mental health has a lot to do with it. For me it does. I try to make myself presentable every day regardless of where I come out of...But mentally it affects me like I don’t want to talk to anybody. I don’t want to be friendly. ‘Don’t look at me’ I’m thinking in my mind, you know what I mean?...It changes my personality. It makes me anti-social. And I was a massage therapist for 20 years so I’m used to talking to people. And I get along great with people. But lately, since I’ve been living on the street, I don’t want to talk to the public. And that bothers me because I am not that person.”

Another exclaimed: “If we had water it would help us get a job.” He added,

“we can’t just walk in there smelling like shit.”

The loss of self confidence and the time it takes to tend to these basic necessities makes it hard for people to move forward in life. As one man put it simply:

“You can’t be productive if you are worried about where to go to the bathroom.”

WASH, Gender, and Intersectionality

Women, transgender and gender nonconforming people who are unhoused face further barriers when attempting to access WASH, which puts their health and safety at risk. It was hard for people who are unhoused to obtain and secure menstrual hygiene products and to keep themselves clean during this time of the month. There was only one bathroom in Denver with menstrual hygiene products available for free. Without these supplies, people used unsafe alternatives like newspapers, or kept tampons and pads inserted for an unsafe amount of time which led to health issues.

Most of the women we spoke with felt unsafe when they had to use public bathrooms, especially at night. Women talked about being harassed at the bathrooms, and said that male attendants often barged in when they using the toilet. One woman we surveyed was raped twice when using outhouses and another reported that she had to give sexual favors to use the bathroom at a 7-11. Another survey respondent said she defecates using a bag in her “sleeping bag because it's more comfortable and people won't bother me.”

A transgender woman who participated in the survey explained that she can rarely find restrooms she feels comfortable using.

Moreover, she was physically attacked by another unhoused individual during the survey, and exclaimed that she was “used to it by now,” thus highlighting the added dehumanization and violence faced by queer people trying to access WASH.

People with disabilities had particular bathroom challenges: many parks lacked ADA accessible bathrooms (and water fountains). One man in a wheelchair said he was never able to find a bathroom that he could comfortably enter so he usually used a bag in his tent. He described how gross it was to roll through filth on the bathroom floor and then have to use his hands to maneuver his chair.

47% of the open bathrooms were not ADA accessible.

23% of the open bathrooms did not have locks or locks that were working.

Nearly all of the permanent bathroom facilities lacked gender neutral bathrooms.

“My ptsd from being raped is really bad, and I get really triggered around men. And like the port a potties, there [are] a lot of men all around them. And the men are terrible around there, they call me names like bitch and it's just terrible there.”

Stigma, Discrimination and Exclusion

People experiencing homelessness were often denied access to toilets due to their physical appearance and the assumption that they will dirty the bathroom or use drugs in it. A vicious cycle of dehumanization takes place when people are denied WASH because they are unhoused, yet they are unable to take steps toward more permanent housing or jobs without the ability to stay clean and healthy.

While there were some friendly businesses and personal relationships, discrimination and exclusion was the norm. People we interviewed described how businesses locked their outside taps, called the cops, and profiled them. “There is no store around here that we can go to or business that will provide us with water,” one interviewee stated, “Even if we bring our own containers. They don't want us at their business because they think we steal or think we are going to use drugs.”

All interviewees reported an increase in the frequency that businesses require a purchase to use their facilities. Even with this policy in place, people we spoke with told stories about making large purchases and still being denied access to toilets.

“People don't realize that this person is homeless and they can't just go anywhere to go use the bathroom.... They got to relieve themselves somewhere. And then that's where all the stigma comes in about homeless being dirty and bad and low.”



“I literally peed my pants on the side of the Safeway because they won't let me use the bathroom. And then they escorted me out and threatened to have me arrested because of it.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Goal: Everyone has safe, affordable, dignified, reliable, 24/7 access to water and toilet facilities within 2 blocks (and less than 5 minutes) of where they are staying.

“

It's unnecessary to have this much difficulty for humans to have access to water, toilets and hygiene. We're not a third world country, everyone deserves to be taken care of, respected and acknowledged.

”



1. Increase access to bathrooms and water fountains.

- Ensure that all public bathrooms and water fountains are functioning.
- Construct more facilities in places recommended by the unhoused population. In our survey people wanted bathrooms and water at parks, encampments, and transit stations. Other general locations mentioned frequently were downtown, the 16th street mall, outside shelters, outside libraries and rec centers, businesses, and city bike/walk trails. Specific locations mentioned by more than 3 people include: Civic Center Park, Union Station, Benedict Fountain Park, Decatur and Federal transit hub, and the intersections of Colfax (and Broadway, Ogden, Pearl), Stout Street (21st and 20th), Arkins and 29th. Another intersection mentioned by activists was Park Ave/Broadway/Lawrence.
- Increase access to public bathrooms in existing city buildings such as rec centers. There should be an open door policy for the unhoused to use rec center bathrooms. If needed the City could hire staff for some of these bathrooms.
- Provide toilet, water and shower facilities at encampments. Give funding to groups who are already doing this work. Bring back the mobile toilets, which were positively evaluated by users and the City and/or set up porta potties at encampments. These toilets need regular cleaning, sharps containers, trash containers and a handwashing station. They can be cleaned (in combination with the larger encampment) by hiring folks who live there to do the work. The porta potties must be dumped by the maintenance company at least once a day depending on the size of the encampment.
- Require shelters to keep their bathrooms open 24/7.

2. Improve maintenance at existing facilities

- More frequent cleaning is needed for bathrooms of high use.
- Construct facilities that can withstand vandalism and be easily cleaned: the Portland Loo is a good model that satisfies these conditions.
- At a minimum all bathrooms must be ADA accessible, and have toilet paper, locking doors and a way to wash hands.
- More bathrooms need child changing stations, pad/tampon dispensers, sharps containers and gender neutral access.
- Water fountains need to be clean and to provide enough pressure to fill bottles. Water filters, like those in most libraries, which are designed to fill up bottles are preferred.

3. Keep water fountains and toilets open all year.

- Install freeze resistant fountains in places needed by the unhoused population.
- Install drinking fountains outside of public buildings like rec centers so the plumbing can be on the inside where it doesn't freeze.
- Build more plumbed winterized bathrooms and keep them open all year.

4. Get businesses involved.

- Offer businesses a subsidy, or provide all bathroom supplies and cleaning, if they open their bathrooms to everyone regardless of whether they purchase something. Businesses in the program should post a sign in their windows announcing that their bathroom is open to all.
- Involve businesses in lobbying efforts with the City because they also have an incentive for the City to construct more bathrooms.

5. Change the social stigma around the unhoused

- Ensure that City officials, the media, and houseless service organizations are using people centered language and not criminalizing the unhoused or blaming them for the city's sanitation issues. Include the unhoused in the "public" when talking about public health problems.

6. Test and protect water quality

- Regularly test the water quality at outdoor public fountains and find solutions to mitigate contamination if it exists. Currently nobody is testing the water and considering the seasonal closures that allow lead to build up this could be a major problem for people who depend on these water sources.

7. Put up maps and signage to locate and identify bathrooms.

- Put up signs and maps of the City's bathrooms at transit stations.
- Regularly update the baseline Google map of WASH facilities and publicize the link.

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