

## Living in the shadows: High housing costs force some Massachusetts families to sleep in cars

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**WEYMOUTH, Mass.** — William Thorn, Jr. spends his days avoiding most people, trying not to attract too much attention.

“You’ve got to just know where to park,” Thorn said. “Usually nobody bothers you.”

The 46-year-old is hitching his pick-up truck to a camper outside the Weymouth Walmart.

“Walmart is always camper friendly, a safe place to stay,” he said.

With his camper and everything he owns in tow, he bounces around parking lots and truck stops between Maine and Massachusetts. Thorn said he hasn’t had a permanent address in five years.

“It’s so hard to survive in this world today. The expenses are insane. I don’t know how people don’t work seven days a week,” he said.

He picks up odd jobs and handiwork where he can.

“I’m always thankful for having a nice truck, a reliable truck, I have my health, wherever I have to go,” he said.

He’s not alone. He sees others living the same life, in a car or truck, off the grid, in the shadows. Earlier that week, another man pulled up next to his camper. Thorn said it was obvious the man was living in his car.

“I think you might be surprised at the number,” Thorn said. “Not even ‘homeless,’ just people just in their cars. I think the number is bigger than you could imagine.”

According to data from the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, since 2012 nearly 3,800 Massachusetts families admitted to sleeping in places not meant for habitation. Those places include cars, bus stops or campgrounds.

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“We definitely hear about people sleeping in cars because the rent is too high and because shelter eligibility for families is too restrictive,” said Kelly Turley, associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

There are around 3,700 families and another 3,600 adults without children in state-funded shelters, Turley said.

The Massachusetts homeless population dropped 8% in 2018 to 18,471 individuals, according to statistics released last month by [the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#).

But in the last decade, HUD’s data reveals the number of homeless in the Bay State rose at a startling rate, increasing by nearly 20% between 2009 and 2019. Only five states had a higher increase.

“We know that many of the units that are available right now are not at fair market rents. They’re far beyond that,” said Kelly Turley, associate director of the Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless.

Turley said Massachusetts is ranked the third least affordable state in terms of housing prices for renters.

“It’s getting worse and worse in terms of how much someone would have to earn per hour in order to afford a fair market rent apartment.”

While many Massachusetts cities and towns are decriminalizing homelessness, other parts of the country are cracking down.

Last summer, police in [Fort Collins, Colorado](#) began writing tickets and threatening to tow cars belonging to homeless people.

The problem is so bad in San Diego, the city banned “[car living](#)” during certain overnight hours near residences and schools.

“This was the low point. I was pretty much done,” Lynnette Martin said, thinking back to the night in Framingham in 2016 when she and her two young sons slept in their car.

“It was terrible. It was cold. We’re all cramped. All of our stuff is in the back,” Martin said. “I couldn’t imagine how tortured it could be...not having privacy, not have a place you can use the bathroom, not a place to eat, take a shower.”

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Lynnette Martin said most families don’t ask for help because they fear losing their children to the Department of Children and Families. But after that cold night in her Chevy Equinox, Martin called her son’s school and told a teacher about their situation.

“I said, ‘We need help,’ and she said, ‘Come over to the school tomorrow and we’ll take care of it. We’ll help you out.’”

Martin now lives in affordable housing in Marlborough.

“The only thing I was thinking was, don’t give up, don’t give up, don’t give up,” Martin said.

If someone can’t find a shelter, Turley recommends applying for affordable housing now, even if it means waiting.

“Applying for affordable housing can take a long time, but if somebody is not on the waiting list their name will never come up,” Turley said. “It can obviously make a big difference between ending someone’s homelessness or someone staying in their car for an extended period of time.”

Driving to his next destination, Thorn wondered if the time to find a permanent home may have passed him by.

“Yeah, it’s not easy. It’s very hard. Yeah, it’s harder probably than your life. But this is just where I’ve come,” Thorn said.

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