



## Homelessness Among People on Delaware’s Sex Offender Registry

DATA FROM DELAWARE’S SEX OFFENDER REGISTRY (SOR) OFFERS A UNIQUE VIEW OF HOMELESSNESS AMONG THIS AT-RISK POPULATION. THE 120 PEOPLE WHO WERE ON THE SOR AND HOMELESS ON A GIVEN NIGHT:

- REPRESENTED 4.6% OF THE 2,613 PEOPLE ON DELAWARE’S SOR.
- WERE CLUSTERED IN 7 CITIES (78% OF THE HOMELESS SOR POPULATION) AND 9 ZIP CODES (73%).
- HAD AN EMPLOYMENT RATE OF 40%.
- MIRRORED THE PROFOUND RACIAL DISPARITIES THAT EXISTED AMONG THE GENERAL SOR POPULATION.
- WERE OVERWHELMINGLY 1-TIME OFFENDERS (88%) WITH 10+ YEARS ON THE SOR (65%).

THESE FINDINGS OFFER INSIGHTS ON HOMELESSNESS MORE GENERALLY AND SHOW THE NEED FOR MORE COMPREHENSIVE DATA ON DELAWARE’S HOMELESS POPULATION.

Delaware, like all states, maintains a publicly accessible sex offender registry (SOR) containing information on the whereabouts of people convicted of sex crimes. One of the features of Delaware’s SOR is that it identifies who among those on the registry are currently experiencing homelessness.<sup>i</sup>

Having a conviction for a sex offense substantially increases a person’s risk for becoming homeless. The stigma that such a conviction carries leads to difficulty in securing employment and housing. Furthermore, many localities proscribe people convicted of sex offenses from living in “buffer zones” around places that feature concentrations of children, such as schools and parks.<sup>ii</sup>

Once homeless, people on the SOR face additional constraints. Either by law, by policy or by practice, many homeless services and much of the already scarce affordable housing are off limits to them.

If someone on Delaware’s SOR experiences homelessness, they must report this to the Delaware State Police, who maintain the SOR, and must update their status on a regular basis, depending on their risk level. This information is then posted to the publicly accessible, online SOR. The SOR also provides details about personal identity (including date of birth), home address, and employment information.

This information, including information on housing status, is often considered private and protected when it is on other

governmental databases. Ironically, Delaware's SOR provides a more comprehensive source of population-level information on homelessness than most databases that focus more specifically on homelessness.

The homeless population is a notoriously difficult population to count, as they are difficult to identify and to locate, and often wish to keep the circumstances of their lack of housing private. In contrast, all persons on Delaware's SOR must promptly report their homelessness to the Delaware State Police under the threat of criminal penalty if they fail to do so. As such, Delaware's SOR provides useful information for understanding dynamics of homelessness, as people whose homelessness would otherwise be unrecognized report and regularly update their housing circumstances.

In this brief, we provide an overview of homelessness among people convicted of sex offenses based on information in Delaware Sex Offender Registry (SOR). While these records are publicly available, we analyze them as though they were confidential and only present aggregated findings in such a manner that precludes identifying individuals.

## RESULTS

### Prevalence of Homelessness

**4.6% of the SOR population in Delaware communities were homeless on a given night.**

Of the 2,613 people living in Delaware communities who were on the SOR on November 15, 2021, 120, or 4.6%, reported being homeless on that night.

This is substantially higher than findings from other states where between 2 and 3

percent of people registered on SORs have been homeless or transient on a given night.<sup>iii</sup>

This is also exponentially higher than the 0.1% of Delaware's population that were counted as homeless in Delaware's 2021 Point in Time Count (1,579 people in a statewide population of 989,948).<sup>iv</sup>

People on the SOR, regardless of housing status, are required to provide an address of residence. Only seven of those who reported being homeless provided a shelter or transitional housing facility among the places they were staying. Many others provided information about unsheltered locations such as "College Road in red/white tent" or "sleep at 7<sup>th</sup> St. Bridge and Rodney Square."

### Geography of SOR homelessness

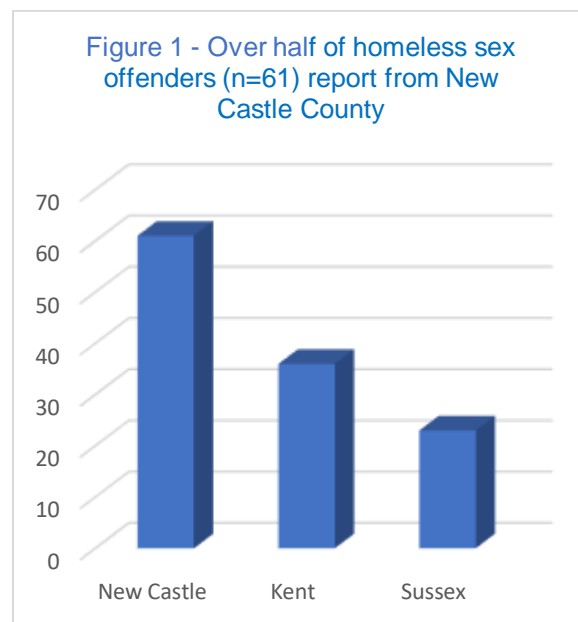


Figure 1 breaks down the number of people on the SOR reporting homelessness by Delaware's three **counties**.

Just over half of all people on the SOR (n=61) reported from New Castle County

(Figure 1), which is consistent with the county's share of the statewide population.

Taking such population dynamics one step further:

- Kent County was the most overrepresented county in terms of people on the SOR (1 person per 105 residents);
- New Castle County was the most underrepresented county in terms of people on the SOR (1 person per 505 residents), but also had the highest rates of homelessness among its residents on the SOR (6.0%);
- Sussex County had the lowest proportion of those who were on the SOR and homeless (2.8%).<sup>v</sup>

Among the 120 people who were on Delaware's SOR and homeless, 94 (78%) reported from 7 **cities** (Figure 2): Wilmington (n=36), Dover (n=26), New Castle, Newark, Georgetown, Seaford, and Rehoboth Beach.<sup>vi</sup> In contrast, only 17% of the statewide population lived in these seven cities.

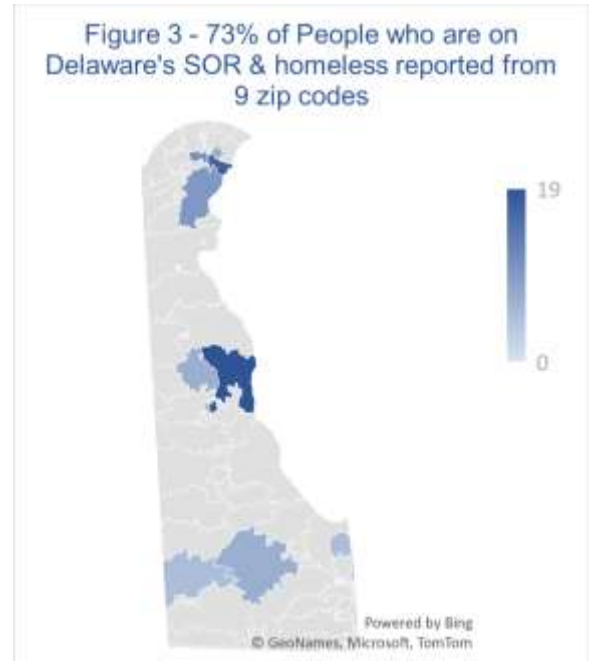
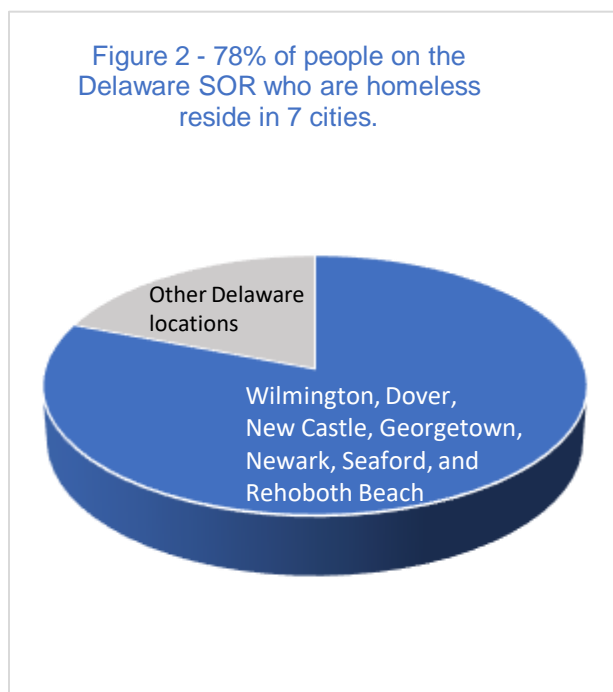


Figure 3 shows even more clustering in select **ZIP codes**:

- 35 of the 36 persons reporting from Wilmington were from three ZIP codes: 19801, 19802 and 19805.
- All 26 in Dover were either from 19901 or 19904.
- Other ZIP codes with high concentrations include 19720 (New Castle), 19947 (Georgetown), 19971 (Rehoboth Beach) and 19973 (Seaford).

In total, just under three-quarters of the 120 persons (n=88 or 73%) who were on Delaware's SOR and homeless reported from these nine zip codes.

## Employment

**40% of those on Delaware's SOR and homeless were employed.**

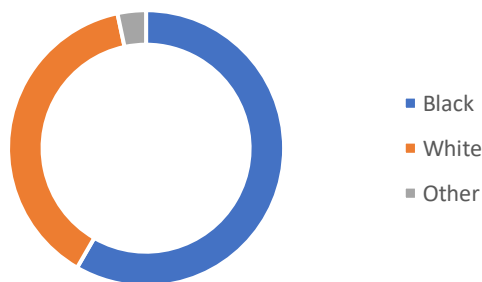
Forty-eight persons (40%) were **employed**, despite facing the logistical challenges of homelessness and bearing the stigma of their being on the SOR. Employment included full-time, part-time and temporary work.

One particular logistical issue related to employment is **automobile ownership**, as only 28% reported having a vehicle.

## Demographics

In terms of **race and ethnicity**, those who were on Delaware's SOR and homeless were disproportionately Black (58%), while those who were White (39%) and Hispanic or Asian (combined 3%) were underrepresented compared to their presence in Delaware's general population (Figure 4).

Figure 4 - The racial distribution of persons who are on Delaware's SOR and homeless is incongruent with the distribution in Delaware's overall population



This distribution is very similar, however, to the racial and ethnic distribution of all who are on Delaware's SOR. Here the racial disparity inherent to the SOR does not become more pronounced among the subpopulation that is homeless.

Figure 5 - Among persons who are on Delaware's SOR and homeless, the median age is 43 and a substantial proportion (38%) are age 50 and over.

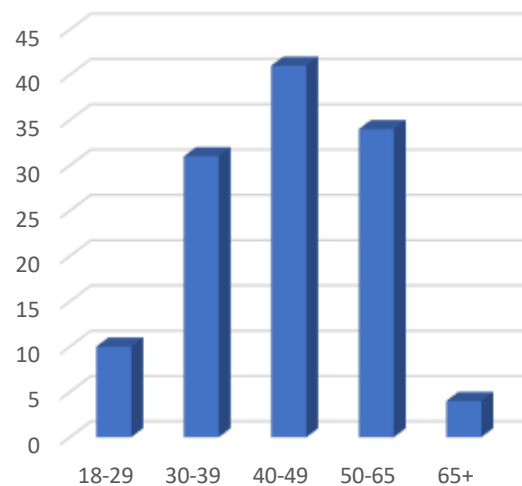
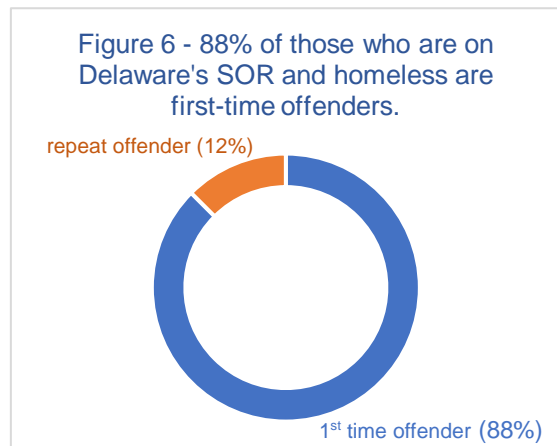


Figure 5 shows the **age** distribution of those who are on Delaware's SOR and homeless. A high proportion of this group (38%) is over 50, which is consistent with the Delaware's aging population.

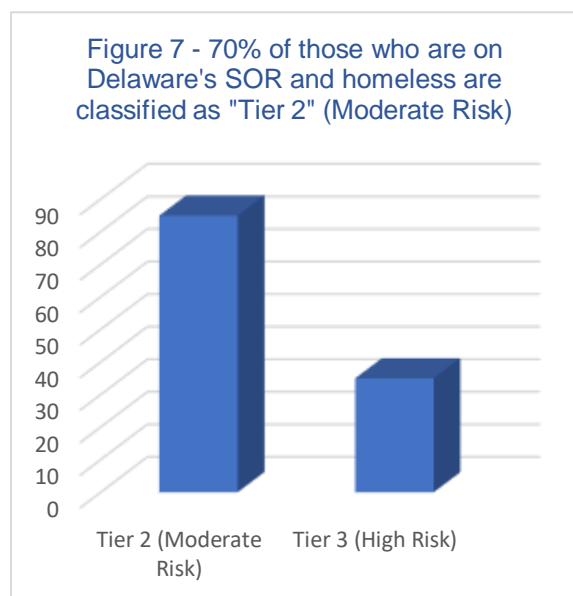
The **gender** of the 120 persons who were on Delaware's SOR and homeless was almost exclusively male, as only one person identified as female. This corresponds closely to the demography of the general sex offender population in Delaware<sup>vii</sup> and the United States.<sup>viii</sup>

## Sex Offender Registry Dynamics

The final group of results provides some findings related to criminal justice-related information that is on the SOR.



An overwhelming proportion (88%) of the 120 people on Delaware's SOR who were homeless were **first-time offenders** (Figure 6). This is consistent with findings from many studies that have found low levels of recidivism among people convicted of sex offenses, and runs contrary to the rationale for seeking to impose geographic and other restrictions upon this population.<sup>ix</sup>



As shown in the Figure 7, 85 people had their **risk assessment** level labeled as tier 2 (moderate risk), and thirty-five offenders were placed in tier 3 (high risk). People with tier 2 designations are considered "moderate risk" for reoffending and tier 3 designation is considered "high risk". People convicted of Tier 1 (low risk) sex offenses are not put on Delaware's publicly accessible SOR.

Tier 2 offenders must verify their SOR information twice a year to the Delaware State Bureau of Identification (SBI), and tier 3 offenders must verify their SOR information four times a year. On becoming homeless, however, persons with tier 2 designations must report in-person to an SBI office every 30 days, while those with tier 3 designations must report in-person every seven days.

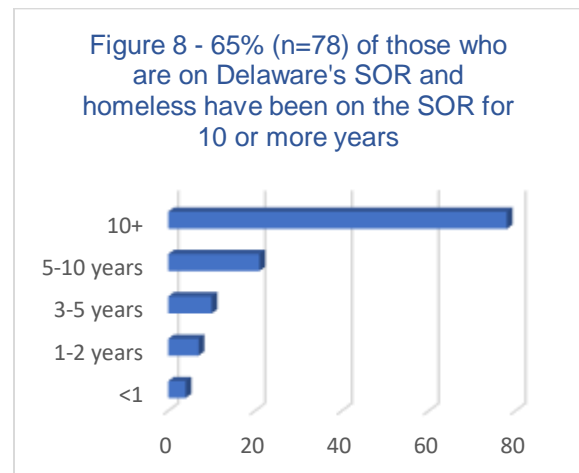


Figure 8 indicates the **number of years on the SOR** for those who are homeless. Tier 2 level registrants are required to register for 25 years and tier 3 level registrants are required to register for life.

The results shows that just under two-thirds of the 120 who are homeless have been on the SOR for over a decade. The median time spent on the SOR for this group is 12 years.

## IMPLICATIONS

On November 15, 2021, 4.6% of persons on the SOR were homeless. This shows that the level of homelessness among those convicted of sex offenses is far higher than that of the general population. The findings also provide a window into homelessness more generally and the limitations related to collecting comprehensive data on the homeless population in Delaware.

Research indicates that “housing instability is a risk factor for criminal recidivism and parole absconsion, raising concerns that the lack of stable housing among [registered sex offenders] poses a threat to public safety.”<sup>x</sup> The instability can also impede access to needed substance abuse and mental health services, and otherwise decreases the likelihood of successful reintegration into the community.<sup>xi</sup>

The SOR, insofar as it draws attention to the presence of persons convicted of sex offenses in the community, likely further contributes to their difficulty in locating housing and to elevated risk for homelessness. However, the SOR also has the potential to act as a “by-name list” that service providers can use to address and ameliorate the homelessness in this group.

The SOR is well-suited for use as a by-name list in that it provides a frequently updated, comprehensive roster of who among this high-risk subgroup is homeless. The list’s repository of information on individual identifiers (name, date of birth, etc.) and locations would facilitate reaching out to those designated as homeless. Workers can then coordinate efforts to target the housing and services that would alleviate this group’s homelessness.<sup>xii</sup>

The use of by-name lists is a “best practice” approach that has contributed to the elimination of homelessness among veterans in Delaware<sup>xiii</sup> and in other localities across the US.<sup>xiv</sup> With the SOR, providers and policy makers have a basis

for a similar initiative to end homelessness among people convicted of sex offenses.

This identifying and locational data that is publicly available on the SOR is typically considered confidential on health and social services-related databases. In the latter systems, elaborate protocols are set up to keep such information private. In contrast, the Delaware State Police disseminates such information openly on the SOR. And while, generally, people prefer to keep any homelessness they experience private and off of forms and records, people on the SOR are legally mandated to report information regarding their housing status.

These special circumstances allow the SOR to achieve a comprehensiveness that contrasts with the incomplete nature of the homeless Point in Time (PIT) count. The PIT count, the most commonly used measure of homeless population size, is mandated for local jurisdictions that receive federal homeless assistance. It consists of an annual “snapshot” count of local homeless populations on a given night.<sup>xv</sup>

The PIT count includes a count of the unsheltered homeless population, for which volunteers scour locations where they are likely to sleep and enumerate as many people who appear homeless as they can find.

The PIT count notoriously undercounts homeless populations, and particularly those that are unsheltered.<sup>xvi</sup> The SOR-based count gives some indication of the extent to which the PIT count undercounts the unsheltered homeless population.

There were at least 110 homeless persons on the SOR who described living in unsheltered circumstances on November 15. In comparison, the last PIT count in Delaware that included the unsheltered homeless population, in 2020, counted only 150 unsheltered homeless individuals in total.<sup>xvii</sup>

As the large majority of the unsheltered homeless population are not on the SOR,

comparing these two counts indicates that the true number of unsheltered homeless is several orders of magnitude higher than what is counted in the PIT.

The SOR also indicates the presence of homelessness in areas that are not canvassed in the PIT, nor in outreach or other services that target people who are unsheltered. Concentrations of homelessness in and around towns such as New Castle, Georgetown and Seaford that are reported in this brief indicate that there are almost certainly additional individuals who are homeless in these area who have no records of sex offenses.

In the absence of comprehensive outreach and other homeless services, unsheltered homelessness in these areas only gains visibility under extraordinary circumstances. A tragic example of this was when, in 2020, four people died from carbon monoxide poisoning in an encampment in Stanton.<sup>xviii</sup>

The comprehensive coverage afforded by the SOR also contrasts with the limited coverage of the Community Management Information System (CMIS), which is a data repository for shelter, housing, and other services provided to Delaware's homeless population from the state's homeless services providers.<sup>xix</sup>

Ideally, CMIS will provide the basis for a data-informed approach to more efficient and effective planning and providing of homeless services. However, according to Housing Alliance Delaware, which maintains CMIS, the current CMIS data is insufficiently

complete for drawing accurate conclusions about homelessness in Delaware.<sup>xx</sup>

Greater data sharing between CMIS and State government entities would substantially increase CMIS data coverage. Currently, only the State's Division of Substance Abuse and Mental Health shares data with CMIS. The State does not share the SOR data with CMIS, nor does it share data it collects in its position as the majority provider of temporary housing to homeless households in Delaware.

In conclusion, an unintended function of Delaware's SOR is that it provides the basis for examining homelessness among a high-risk population for which there is a lack of significant initiatives (social service, political, housing or other) that systematically address their housing need. Furthermore, findings presented here, based upon our analysis of SOR data, suggest that there are substantially higher levels of overall homelessness than more conventional homeless data collection efforts in Delaware can detect.

We are not supportive of mandatory collecting of identifying information and data on housing status for a registry which is publicly shared online. However, this examination of SOR data in the context of homelessness spotlights the need to address housing issues among this population, and to improve data collection on homelessness in Delaware using more conventional means.

*This report was produced by the University of Delaware Center for Community Research and Service*

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## ENDNOTES

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