UCI-OC Poll Surveys Orange County Residents on Homelessness and Affordable Housing

Finds broad consensus that both are the most serious problems facing the County, that residents are familiar with the issues, and that the public widely agrees on multiple policy responses

2023 Synopsis

UCI School of Social Ecology

United Way
Orange County United Way

UNITED TO END HOMELESSNESS℠
Empowered by Orange County United Way

Homelessness and Affordable Housing

Homelessness and the lack of **affordable housing** are prime challenges confronting municipalities across California and the nation. Orange County is no exception. For years, residents, elected officials, and nonprofit leaders have struggled with the issues.

Part of the challenge in responding to these social problems is the lack of good information on the public's attention to, understanding of, and willingness to tackle the issues. When individual residents and advocacy groups voice their opinions to civic leaders, it is difficult to tell how representative they are of larger perspectives in the community or how attitudes might vary across Orange County.

The UCI-OC Poll

UC Irvine's School of Social Ecology recently commissioned a countywide poll – The UCI-OC Poll – to delve broadly and deeply into social problems facing Orange County and produce good data to assist leaders in reaching evidence-based decisions. The first edition, which was fielded in the late spring of 2023, addressed homelessness and affordable housing.

Surveying 818 adults across Orange County, the poll provides a broad perspective of public opinion, a comparison of responses across demographic groups and communities, and an opportunity to test different policy messages and options.

This first edition of the UCI-OC Poll was conducted in partnership with Orange County United Way, which helped craft questions, review the results, and convene leaders from across Orange County to move the policy conversation forward.

The Takeaway

If there is one primary conclusion from the poll, it is that Orange County residents seek action to address homelessness and affordable housing and are supportive of many policy responses. This is true across different communities and among various demographic and political groups.

OC residents consider homelessness and affordable housing to be the two most serious problems confronting the County; they are familiar with the issues, as many have regular exposure to homelessness; they believe it is our collective responsibility to address these problems; they are willing to commit resources to do so; and they support multiple policy measures that would help remedy homelessness and the lack of affordable housing.

If there are differences, they are typically in relative levels of support on particular policy options or in how the issue is framed (homelessness vs. lack of affordable housing).
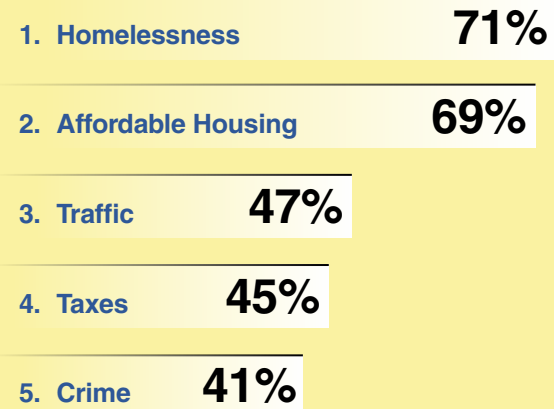
What follows are the most compelling conclusions from the UCI-OC Poll. To learn more about the poll and view the questionnaire and responses, click on https://sites.uci.edu/ocpoll. Additional information is available at www.unitedtoendhomelessness.org/oc-poll
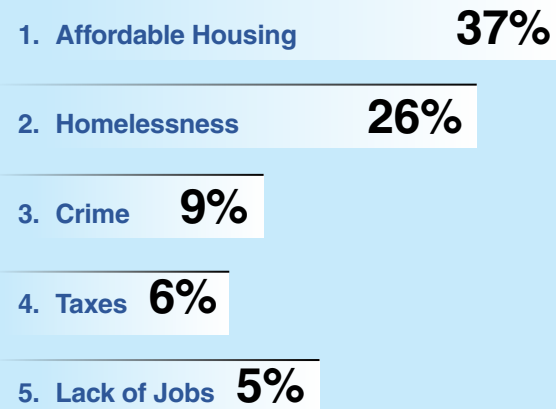
Homelessness and Lack of Affordable Housing are, by far, considered the most serious problems in Orange County

When asked to name serious problems in Orange County from a list they were given, residents uniformly cited:

1. Homelessness **71%**
2. Affordable Housing **69%**
3. Traffic **47%**
4. Taxes **45%**
5. Crime **41%**

However, when asked to pick the most serious problem from that same list, people said:

1. Affordable Housing **37%**
2. Homelessness **26%**
3. Crime **9%**
4. Taxes **6%**
5. Lack of Jobs **5%**

The ranking of "most serious" varies by location. Homelessness is highlighted more in the Northeast and Central parts of the County. Affordable housing is prioritized elsewhere, especially in the South.

Second Supervisor District (Central):
Homelessness: **43%**. Affordable housing: **30%**

Third Supervisor District (East):
Homelessness **15%**. Affordable housing: **38%**.

Fourth Supervisor District (Northeast):
Homelessness: **29%**. Affordable housing: **27%**

Fifth Supervisor District (South):
Homelessness: **8%**. Affordable housing: **53%**.

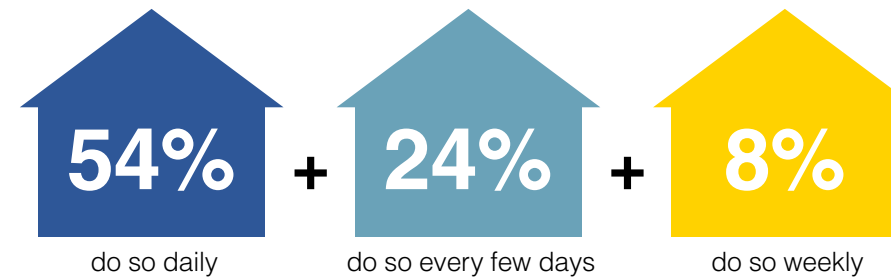**First Supervisor District (North):**
Homelessness: **22%**. Affordable housing: **34%**.

Orange County residents are familiar with homelessness

▶ **A majority (55%) knows someone who is or has been homeless**

37% + **18%** **42%**

know someone who has experienced homelessness

know someone currently experiencing homelessness

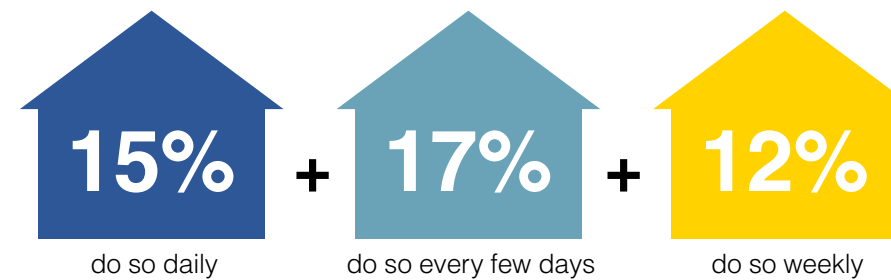don't know anyone who has experienced homelessness

Familiarity is most common in Second/Central District (60%), whereas the others vary from 51-56%

▶ **More than 85% of OC residents see someone experiencing homelessness at least weekly**

54% + **24%** + **8%**

do so daily

do so every few days

do so weekly

Contact is most likely in the Second/Central District (95% see a person experiencing homelessness at least weekly) compared to the Third/East (78%) or Fifth /South (74%) Districts.

▶ **Close to half of OC residents (44%) interact with a person experiencing homelessness at least weekly**

15% + **17%** + **12%**

do so daily

do so every few days

do so weekly

Interaction is more than twice as likely in the Second/Central District (59%) than in the Fifth/South District (26%).

Residents are evenly split in their belief between whether homelessness is caused by personal choices (45%) or situations beyond someone's control (45%).

The Threat of Homelessness is Real and Personal to Almost One-third of Orange County Residents

52%
of renters have worried in the last year about being able to pay their rent and the threat of eviction

20%
of homeowners have worried in the last year about being able to pay their mortgage and the risk of foreclosure

Fears of eviction and foreclosure are greater among those with lower levels of income and education
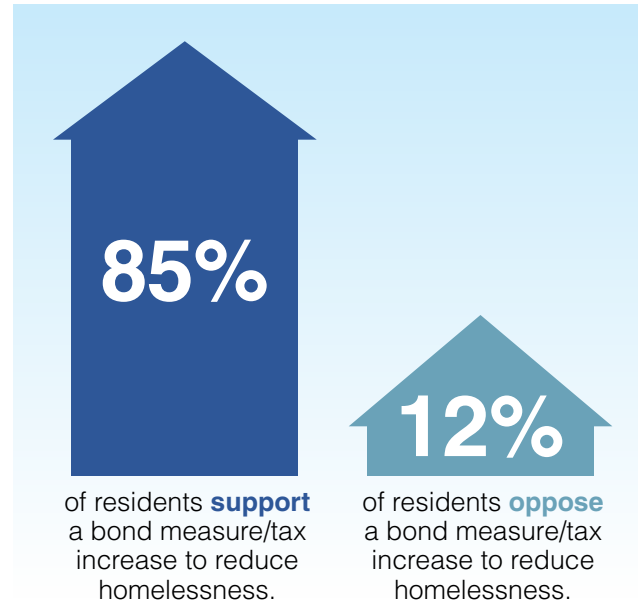
Orange County Residents Believe it is Our Collective Responsibility to Solve Homelessness and the Lack of Affordable Housing

By wide margins, residents look to the County Board of Supervisors **(66%)** and City Councils **(66%)** to address these problems in partnership with nonprofits **(42%)**, advocacy groups **(34%)**, religious organizations **(28%)**, and large companies **(27%)**.

When asked who should be most responsible, residents chose the County Board of Supervisors **(40%)** and City Councils **(26%)**. No other entity rose above **4%**, although a fifth of residents were not sure.

Orange County Residents Are Willing to Commit Resources to Address Homelessness

85%

of residents **support** a bond measure/tax increase to reduce homelessness.

12%

of residents **oppose** a bond measure/tax increase to reduce homelessness.

3% of residents neither support nor oppose

Levels of support for a bond measure/tax increase hold true across varying demographics and geographic locations, although difference exist across gender (**90%** of women support vs. **78%** of men), partisan identification (**94%** of Democrats, **80%** of Republicans and **78%** of independents support), and age (**91%** of young adults support vs. **81%** of seniors).

For comparison, OC residents also support bond measures to improve K-12 education **(86%)**, improve or build new infrastructure **(72%)**, hire more social workers **(68%)**, hire more police officers **(68%)** and offset carbon emissions **(58%)**.

Orange County Residents Strongly Support Multiple Approaches to Address Homelessness and the Lack of Affordable Housing

The survey also asked Orange County residents to assess the effectiveness of a range of potential policies to combat homelessness, as well as whether any of these policies attracted strong political opposition. Below are the policies that have the highest assessments of their effectiveness, and the lowest levels of strong opposition.

88% believe it is effective to increase mental health services for those experiencing homelessness. Only **14%** strongly oppose its implementation.

78% believe it is effective to build more shelters for those experiencing homelessness. **16%** strongly oppose.

77% believe it is effective for local governments to place people who suffer from mental health and substance abuse disorders into conservatorships and court-ordered treatment to reduce homelessness. **18%** strongly oppose.

76% believe it is effective to build long-term housing for those experiencing homelessness. **15%** strongly oppose.

72% believe it is effective to hire more social workers to connect people experiencing homelessness with services and support. **11%** strongly oppose.

67% believe it is effective to provide rent vouchers to those experiencing homelessness. **17%** strongly oppose

66% believe it is effective to focus government resources on curbing the distribution of illegal drugs to prevent homelessness. **18%** strongly oppose.

65% believe it is effective to lower property taxes to prevent homelessness. **16%** strongly oppose.

Other Potential Policies Are More Controversial

Only **28%** consider cash payments to the homeless to be effective, and **42%** strongly oppose this measure.

Slightly more than half **(53%)** believe it is effective for the police to enforce vagrancy laws. **30%** strongly oppose this approach.

Slightly more than half **(52%)** believe it is effective for the police to clear homeless encampments. **28%** strongly oppose this approach.

Perhaps the Greatest Challenge is Where to Place New Housing

Residents are split on formerly homeless people moving into apartments in their neighborhoods. **43%** are very or somewhat comfortable doing so, whereas **48%** are moderately or strongly uncomfortable.

Residents in the Fourth/North District are least comfortable using housing for the unhoused in their neighborhoods **(33%)**, whereas residents in the First/Northeast **(46%)** and Second/Central Districts **(48%)** are most willing.

Where To Go From Here

The UCI-OC Poll not only provides a wide and deep understanding of public sentiment on homelessness and affordable housing, it also offers a window into residents' general mood. In the poll, Orange County residents were split evenly about whether California's best days are ahead of **(42%)** or behind **(43%)** us, although a plurality **(46%)** felt that Orange County is generally on the right track.

Notably, residents under 45, and especially those under 30, are bullish on the future of the state and County. Their future – and that of Orange County – are tied in many ways to addressing homelessness and the lack of affordable housing. The County is at a rare juncture in which the public has coalesced on the importance of two issues and a willingness to entertain multiple solutions. The question, then, is whether and how leaders will respond.

The UCI-OC Poll seeks to facilitate discussion, planning and appropriate action, and in partnership with Orange County United Way, we look forward to advancing evidence-based decision making on what are clearly two primary problems confronting the County.