



VEHICLE RESIDENCY During Housing Instability: Legal Context, Risks, and Transitional Considerations

Important Notice & Disclaimer

The Coalition to End Homelessness neither endorses nor opposes the programs, services, or strategies referenced in this document.

We do **not** Safe Parking Programs, gym access, storage facilities, food distribution, or any of the services mentioned herein. These services and resources exist independently within communities. The purpose of this article is to discuss how to more effectively and safely live in your vehicle for those who have no other options.

If an individual chooses to pursue any of these options, they must independently research, verify, and determine suitability. The Coalition is not responsible if any resource, helpline, website, or service is unavailable, inaccurate, non-responsive, or does not meet expectations.

Only you know your complete situation, needs, and what is best for you.

Executive Summary

Rising housing costs, limited affordable inventory, disaster vulnerability, and shelter capacity constraints have contributed to an increase in unsheltered homelessness across the United States. Vehicles are classified under federal definitions as “places not meant for human habitation.”

While permanent housing is always the safest and most stable option, and while we believe housing is a human right, the reality is that an increasing number of individuals and families are unable to afford housing or shelter. Vehicular living has emerged as a short-term strategy for some individuals and families navigating increasing housing costs without corresponding wage growth, economic displacement, disaster response, shelter avoidance, or other barriers.

This whitepaper examines:

- Federal definitions and housing policy context
- Legal parameters governing vehicular residency
- Mobility and disaster resilience considerations
- Economic comparisons

- Health and safety risks
- The role of Safe Parking Programs

Mobility and Disaster Resilience

Living in a vehicle is not the same as having a home. However, it may be viewed by some as a safer alternative than living unsheltered on the street during emergencies.

Vehicular living may provide immediate mobility during:

- Domestic violence escape scenarios
- Sudden displacement

Keep in mind that you should be aware of hurricanes and other disasters which will be worse for those living in their vehicles.

Compared to traditional housing:

Factor	Vehicle	Leased Housing
Relocation time	Immediate	Requires lease termination and application process
Utility disconnection	Not required	Formal process including deposits
Furniture transfer	Minimal (permanent loss possible)	Required
Disaster evacuation	Direct	Dependent on packing/logistics

In disaster-prone regions, rapid relocation capacity may reduce exposure risk.

(FEMA emergency mobility guidance supports evacuation preparedness but does not endorse vehicle habitation as housing.)

Economic Considerations

Housing acquisition often requires:

- Security deposits
- First and last month's rent
- Background checks
- Utility deposits
- Furniture investment
- Credit screening/guarantor
- Insurance

Most landlords will not rent to individuals with poor credit history or prior evictions, which can make securing permanent housing more difficult.

Vehicle residency eliminates fixed housing overhead but concentrates risk into a single depreciating asset.

According to the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), asset preservation—particularly vehicle retention—is frequently cited as critical for employment continuity.

Transportation research indicates individuals with access to private vehicles can reach significantly more jobs within one hour compared to reliance on public transit alone. Some employment platforms (e.g., delivery services) require vehicle access.

Some individuals may consider selling a vehicle prior to entering homelessness and using those funds toward rental deposits and public transportation, which may be more affordable in certain contexts.

Free community food and clothing services may help preserve financial resources for future housing stabilization.

Health and Safety Risk Profile

Vehicular living carries documented risks.

Heat Exposure

People often need to run air conditioning during extreme heat, which increases fuel costs. CDC guidance warns that enclosed vehicles can reach dangerous internal temperatures rapidly.

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) identifies carbon monoxide exposure from running engines in enclosed spaces as a fatal risk.

Hygiene and Chronic Health

Limited sanitation access increases infection risk and worsens chronic health conditions among unsheltered populations.

Relative risk comparison:

Street exposure — highest risk

Vehicle residency — moderate risk

Permanent housing — lowest risk

Gym memberships and public facilities such as libraries may provide hygiene options, including restroom access. Public beach showers may result in police interaction in some jurisdictions.

Vehicular stabilization must include harm-reduction awareness and hygiene access planning.

Safe Parking Programs (SPPs)

Safe Parking Programs may provide:

- Designated legal overnight parking
- Monitoring/security
- Access to hygiene facilities (varies)
- Case management (varies)
- Coordinated entry integration (varies)

Participation may involve supervision and compliance requirements. Capacity varies significantly.

Some individuals express concern about supervision levels and possible involvement of authorities if program rules are not followed.

Studies (credibility varies) suggest that when paired with case management and rapid rehousing pathways, Safe Parking initiatives may support housing transitions.

SPPs may reduce:

- Law enforcement conflict
- Impoundment risk
- Neighborhood complaints
- Immediate safety exposure

The Coalition does not operate or manage these programs.

There are also unofficial places where people often park. One of these is Walmart. Talk to other people in your community who are living in their vehicles to learn which places are safe and which places are not.

Key Considerations

When shopping for a vehicle, particularly if facing housing insecurity, considerations may include:

- Spacious and flexible seating (fold-flat capability)
- Reliability over aesthetics (e.g., Subaru, Toyota commonly noted for durability)
- Used vehicles over new (cost management)
- Strong fuel efficiency
- Adequate interior leg and storage space

Electric vehicles may present practical limitations depending on charging access.

Additional considerations (individual research required):

- Basic camping equipment
- Portable stove or warmers
- Water supply
- Flashlight and extra batteries
- Phone charger/power bank
- Personal hygiene supplies
- Important documents stored securely
- Basic tool kit and first-aid kit
- Blanket or sleeping bag

Instead of storing furniture in storage units, some individuals may choose to sell non-essential items to preserve funds for housing deposits.

Storage units may exist as an option for belongings; however, sleeping in storage facilities may violate facility policies and local laws.

Parking strategies vary. Less crowded areas are sometimes chosen. Some commercial lots may allow parking depending on local ordinances and enforcement practices.

Law enforcement practices vary by jurisdiction and are governed by local ordinances. Individuals may be asked for identification, vehicle documentation, or welfare checks if children are present.

Only you know your complete situation and what is best for you.

Appendix

1. Federal Definitions and Housing Context

HUD defines homelessness under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as including individuals residing in “places not meant for human habitation,” which includes vehicles.

Recent national PIT data show:

- Increased total homelessness (2023–2024)
- Growth in unsheltered populations
- Increased representation of adults aged 55+

Point-in-Time (PIT) data reflect annual methodology limitations and may not capture the full scope of housing instability.

Vehicles are not considered permanent housing but are included within unsheltered classifications.

2. Legal Framework

2.1 Federal Case Law

Martin v. Boise (2018)

The Ninth Circuit held that criminalizing sleeping outdoors when no shelter beds are available may violate the Eighth Amendment prohibition on cruel and unusual punishment.

Although not binding nationwide, the decision has influenced housing policy discussions and enforcement standards. Enforcement practices vary by city and county.

Johnson v. Grants Pass (pending Supreme Court consideration, 2024–2025)

Debates continue regarding municipal authority to regulate public camping and sleeping when shelter availability is limited.

2.2 Privacy Protections

Under Fourth Amendment jurisprudence, vehicles carry a recognized expectation of privacy, though less than fixed residences. Legal standards vary by circumstance and jurisdiction.

2.3 Federal Housing Policy

Federal housing programs exist but may be difficult to access and are not guaranteed long-term solutions for regaining housing.

HUD Continuums of Care (CoCs) have increasingly approved funding for Safe Parking Programs as transitional stabilization interventions under community planning frameworks.

Safe Parking Programs are recognized in some communities as an emerging option.

2.4. Ethical and Policy Analysis

Permanent housing remains the optimal public health and economic solution.

However, in specific short-term contexts—particularly when shelter capacity is limited, families face separation policies, or individuals are preserving employment—vehicular residency may function as:

- Temporary economic stabilization
- Mobility safeguard
- Disaster resilience mechanism
- Bridge to permanent housing

Public policy discussions often focus on:

- Expanding Safe Parking authorization
- Clarifying municipal enforcement standards
- Integrating case management

- Accelerating rapid rehousing
- Addressing health risks

Balanced policy recognizes both:

- The risks inherent in vehicular living
- The structural housing pressures that lead individuals to adopt it

References

1. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). (2023–2024). Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress.
2. McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. § 11302.
3. HUD Point-in-Time Count Methodology Guide.
4. *Martin v. City of Boise*, 920 F.3d 584 (9th Cir. 2018).
5. *Johnson v. City of Grants Pass* (U.S. Supreme Court docket 2024–2025).
6. *Katz v. United States*, 389 U.S. 347 (1967); *Carroll v. United States*, 267 U.S. 132 (1925).
7. Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009.
8. HUD Continuum of Care Program Interim Rule.
9. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Evacuation Preparedness Guidelines.
10. National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty (NLCHP), Transportation and Homelessness Reports.
11. University of Minnesota Accessibility Observatory, Transportation Access Studies.
12. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Heat Illness Prevention Guidance.
13. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), Carbon Monoxide Safety Advisory.
14. National Health Care for the Homeless Council, Health and Unsheltered Homelessness Reports.
15. Community Safe Parking Program Evaluations (various municipal reports).