



# A HIDDEN CRISIS:

## UNDERSTANDING AND ADDRESSING FURNITURE POVERTY

A WIDER CIRCLE  
July 2024

## Focus of this briefing

**More than 90% of low and no-income households at some point in time will lack critical furniture items that make their homes safe and functional for their families.**

In this briefing, we shed light on the pervasiveness of limited home furnishings, who tends to be most affected, how it impacts families, what is (and is not) being done about it, and how we can work toward a different and better future.

“

*...just imagine going into a place where you have no furniture, you have nowhere to sit, you have nowhere to sleep, you have no dishes, you have no iron, you have no ironing board...*

–Elena, served by A Wider Circle

”

## Centering on people

Many of our neighbors struggle with living situations like the one described above. Fortunately, thousands of families every year find their way to A Wider Circle's Essential Support program, one of the only no-barrier, no-cost furniture banks in the Greater Washington, DC region.

## Defining terms

**Furniture poverty** is defined by the United Kingdom's [End Furniture Poverty](#) campaign as “the inability to access, or afford to maintain, the basic furniture and appliances that provide a household with a decent quality of life and allow it to participate in the norms of society.”<sup>1</sup> Our Essential Support program provides basic furniture items, including mattresses, dining tables and chairs, couches, and dressers. Although we do not directly provide appliances such as refrigerators and stoves, their possession is also essential, and a lack of them is known as **appliance poverty**.

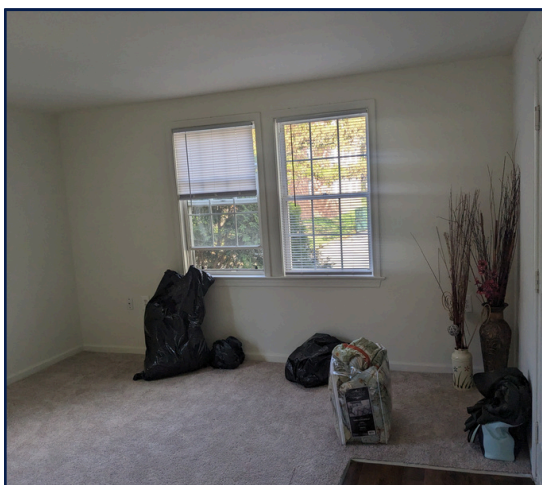
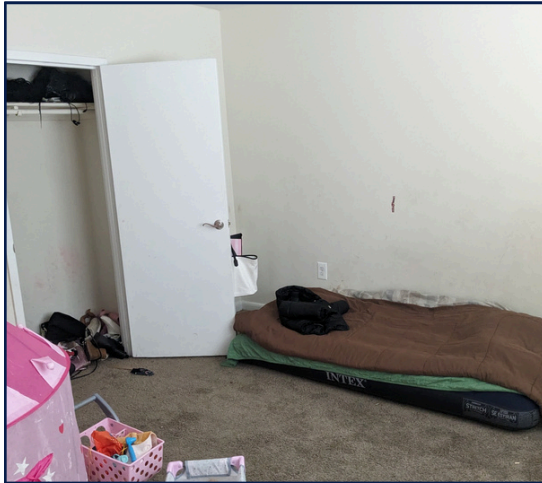
**Furniture stability** is a term we have adopted to signify that a family has all the basic items they need to function well and that these items are safe to use and in dignity condition (meaning they are free from rips, dents, and stains; they are items people would pass on to their loved ones). Our goal is to raise awareness of **furniture poverty** to support those in need to attain **furniture stability**.



# What furniture poverty looks like

Below are photos\* of our clients' homes in May 2024. The "Furniture Stability" pictures show items the clients selected from A Wider Circle and homes decorated with pro bono assistance from local interior designers.

**Furniture Poverty**



**Furniture Stability**



*\*All photos taken and published with permission.*

## The impact of furniture poverty

The importance of affordable housing and solutions to end homelessness are rightfully emphasized in the social services realm as well as public and private funding priorities. Yet, over 22 years of service, we have seen that merely having access to housing is not the same as having a place to call “home” if it is missing basic furniture. If four walls are the container, then furnishings are the ingredients that give the space utility, functionality, comfort, safety, respite, and shape.

Every piece of furniture that turns housing into homes can be taken for granted when we have it, but its absence can cause myriad problems. According to the [End Furniture Poverty](#) campaign, “Not having a bed to sleep on means a poor night’s sleep, affecting your ability to live, work and study...Not having a sofa to sit in means you can be unwilling to invite friends or support workers into your home.”<sup>2</sup> We hear about analogous experiences multiple times each day, but they have been poorly documented in the United States.

When families are unable to obtain furniture from a single source, they must rely on a patchwork of other options, including rummaging, borrowing, renting, purchasing lower-quality items that are likely to break down more quickly, and running up credit without the income to pay the items off.



Furniture poverty can force families to use trash bags for clothing storage and rely on folding chairs as their only seating options.

## Who experiences furniture poverty

Through our 20+ years of operating a furniture bank and serving more than 50,000 families, we believe A Wider Circle's client population is relatively stable and representative of the furniture poverty phenomenon in our region. An analysis of all Essential Support program intakes for furniture recipients in 2023 (n=3,962) revealed:

- 98% of clients were from Washington, DC; Maryland; or Northern Virginia
- 97% were people of color
- 30% spoke a primary language other than English
- The average household size was just over 3 people
- 75% of households were headed by women
- 68% of households were headed by a single parent
- 26% of clients experienced homelessness within the past three months
- 21% reported a physical disability that limited their mobility
- 6% faced domestic violence
- 8% recently fled their home countries
- 3% were US military veterans
- 2% were released from prison in the last year

## How people have come to experience furniture poverty

In 2023, we asked every neighbor served through our Essential Support program how they came to need furniture. The top response was a lack of financial resources, followed by planning to move (or having recently moved) into a home that did not have any existing furnishings. 95% of these neighbors experienced a level of income insecurity in which they could not reliably meet their most basic needs from month to month.

After factoring out financial reasons, we learned that 20% of our neighbors lost their housing (due to eviction, domestic violence, or another reason), 16% had items that were falling apart and could not afford to replace them, 14% needed to replace items due to bed bugs or mold, 10% resettled in the US and had no furniture, and 8% lost items due to a recent flood or fire.



## Regional and national scope of furniture poverty

In an analysis of three months of A Wider Circle data from 2023, 93% of neighbors who came in for a furniture appointment took home at least one basic furniture piece (a dresser, bed, couch, or dining table), and 57% took home all four of these pieces. Item selection reveals a ladder of need, from some furniture insecurity to substantial furniture poverty. In all of 2023, 86% of families were seeking to furnish their existing apartment, room, or house (as opposed to a new space they were moving into). 70% of our neighbors did not already have one or more beds for everyone in their household who needed one.

**Based on our analysis, we believe that furniture poverty affects more than 90% of low and no-income households at some point in time.** This means that families may lack one or more basic items in their homes, and/or will be so financially strapped that an essential item does not get replaced when it becomes unusable due to flood, fire, mold, bedbugs, or breakage.

### Regional

Washington, DC and its four closest counties (Montgomery and Prince George's in Maryland; and Arlington and Fairfax in Virginia) comprise the vast majority of our client base. According to the 2022 Census, this same area had just under 4 million people, with 739,418 people living below 200% of the federal poverty limit\* (a rate of 18.6%).<sup>3</sup> If, consistent with our regional client base, 90% of this group lacks at least one critical furniture item, then furniture poverty impacts about 665,500 people in our area at some point.

*\*Because this is an area where rent often eats up more than half of people's paychecks and inflation has ballooned food budgets, we use below 200% of the federal poverty limit (e.g. an annual household income of less than \$62,400 in 2024 for a family of four) to characterize financial insecurity and those at risk of furniture poverty.*

### National

Through initial comparisons, we believe that the clients who come to A Wider Circle are largely similar in financial security and household size compared to national data of those experiencing poverty. Two key differences are that the households we serve tend to be almost exclusively of people of color and headed by women. If 12.6 percent of the US population is living below the federal poverty line and an additional 15.8% are at 200% below the poverty line ([as of 2022](#)),<sup>4</sup> it likely follows that more than 8.59 million individuals across the United States will experience furniture poverty at some point.

## What furniture stability can do

The provision of furniture “has a considerable positive impact on mental health, financial security, and social wellbeing,” including greater social inclusion, and the increase of tenancy sustainability (i.e., moving around less), according to the [UK’s End Furniture Poverty campaign](#). The Campaign noted that “providing essential items to people living in furniture poverty is transformational. The cost of providing the furniture is a minimal investment compared to the social value created—value that will have a profound impact on people’s lives and undoubtedly save money in the long run by improving people’s mental and physical wellbeing.” <sup>5</sup>

*It was amazing because they were able to come home from school and see that they had a place to sleep. They had a bed. That was good.*

Our intern and sociology researcher Gergana Hardy recently interviewed several furniture recipients, including Elena\*, a single mother with two children under ten. Elena has a physical disability and was escaping domestic violence when a caseworker directed her to us. She spoke about the profound impact of receiving this assistance: “...*They have basically helped me and my family be comfortable living in our first place. Like, they definitely did that because, you know, just imagine going into a place where you have no furniture, you have nowhere to sit, you have nowhere to sleep, you have no dishes, you have no iron, you have no ironing board, you have no, you know...So they really helped set the foundation of being able to move forward no matter who you are. And they don't make you feel like you're being judged when you're in there. It kind of takes you away, but you know that you're cared about.*”

Receiving the furniture not only alleviated a significant financial burden but also reduced the stress of parenting her children alone: “*It was amazing because they were able to come home from school and see that they had a place to sleep. They had a bed. That was good.*”

Elena also described how it allowed her to focus on other essential aspects of life: “*You don't have the finances to do it. It really plays a big role. It, to me, helps jump start...helps calm down the stress...helps you pull your mind together. Especially when you got kids. It's something that you could just say, ‘okay, I got that part done’...that's a huge thing.*”

\*Name changed to protect privacy.

91% of families served by A Wider Circle's Essential Support program in 2023 reported that, after receiving furniture, they were now better able to provide for themselves or their families.

In 2022, we examined academic literature for studies on the impact of furniture poverty and prosperity. There were fewer than five peer-reviewed studies on the topic, and all were qualitative and exploratory in nature. Distilling the themes, we developed a telephone-based survey and reached a random sample of 2% of families (n=79 of 3,962) receiving furniture from A Wider Circle in 2023. The survey probed whether and how the furniture they received made a difference in their day-to-day lives in specific ways:

- 91% reported they were now better able to provide for themselves or their families
- 89% reported they were now better able to focus on other goals (e.g., personal, professional, financial)
- 91% felt more stable in their home because of the furniture they received
- 80% said they now felt healthier (such as having better sleep, fewer aches/pains, improved mood, less stress)
- 91% said they now felt more comfortable or at peace in their home
- 76% reported they now felt safer in their home
- 80% said they were now more likely to have visitors in their home
- 73% reported that interactions with their children improved since receiving furniture
- 69% reported that their children's health or wellbeing improved since receiving furniture

These calls were made one to two months after receiving furniture, so longer-term impact still needs to be examined.





*In the United States, furniture poverty, despite its negative impact on quality of life, is not part of measures of material hardship, nor is it a part of the official and supplemental poverty measures. This gap in formal recognition and data often results in the underestimation of its prevalence as well as obscuring the amount of people affected by it.*



## Where we go from here

The scope of furniture poverty has never been studied in the US to our knowledge. According to Ms. Hardy, “In the United States, furniture poverty, despite its negative impact on quality of life, is not part of measures of material hardship, nor is it a part of the official and supplemental poverty measures. This gap in formal recognition and data often results in the underestimation of its prevalence as well as obscuring the amount of people affected by it.”<sup>6</sup>

Beyond a dearth of data, there is a sheer lack of programs across the US that alleviate furniture poverty. Our efforts to furnish thousands of houses into homes each year is vital work that is not matched by social service or government programs that address homelessness and other social determinants of health. The high demand for our services, and those of other furniture programs like ours, far outpaces capacity.

Coinciding with a lack of data and programs to meet the need, there are no large funding mechanisms that call for an end to furniture poverty. Furthermore, our experience in local and national conversations reveals that even programs operating in adjacent spaces — in housing unhoused people, or case management, for example — typically do not receive any funding to furnish homes. The funding is so restricted that on numerous occasions, transitional living programs have come to us for help furnishing their programs as well. Economically, we save families an average of \$1,511 per household.

We are beginning to study our social return on investment; The Furniture Bank, based in Toronto, [estimated](#) theirs to be nearly \$6 in return for every \$1 invested.<sup>7</sup> We are also considering a study that will ask caseworkers to report on known extents of furniture

poverty amongst their clients, which can help us further extrapolate to the regional level.

We hope to see furniture poverty studied by cities and states in order to truly understand the scope of the problem and begin to build an engine for achieving furniture stability for all.

## Notes

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<https://endfurniturepoverty.org/research-campaigns/understanding-furniture-poverty/what-is-furniture-poverty/>.
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3. “Explore Census Data.” n.d. Data.census.gov. Accessed June 14, 2024.  
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5. Donovan, Claire. 2021. “Poverty and Furnished Tenancy Provision in Social Housing.” <https://endfurniturepoverty.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/NoPlaceLikeHomeSummaryReportFinalOnline-2.pdf>.
6. Hardy, Gergana. 2024. *From Empty Spaces to Welcoming Places: Exploring the Experiences of Furniture Poverty and Provision*. George Mason University.
7. Impact Report, 2023. 2024. Furniture Bank. <https://www.furniturebank.org/wp-content/uploads/2023-Furniture-Bank-Impact-Report-Web-1.pdf>.

## Further Reading

Nubani, Linda, Alaina De Biasi, Marie A. Ruemenapp, Lisa D. Tams, and Robert Boyle. 2022. “The Impact of Living in an Un- or Under-Furnished House on Individuals Who Transitioned from Homelessness.” *Journal of Community Psychology*, April.  
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22865>.

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