

# Sleeping in a Vehicle: The Massive Knowledge Gap

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Vehicular homelessness is a tragically large demographic of Americans that is only growing as the years pass and rents become more and more unsustainable. In fact, one-third of the homeless population lives in their cars, some of which can even be middle-class Americans blindsided by overwhelming expenses. At times, vehicular housing in RVs has been used as a voluntary tactic to shave off a few months of rent. However, it is commonly understood that most tend to be people entering homelessness for the first time, completely unaware of their rights, resources, and strategies on how to survive.

In fact, living in a vehicle can be one of the most expensive ways to live. Even RV residency can exceed average rent costs without proper research or considerations. The most obvious issue is that you won't have running water, food storage, electricity, or good hygiene. All of which will require frequent drives to safe areas, to which you will need to pay for access. Second, extensive use of vehicles will require maintenance and repairs that will pile up your expenses. Third, parking is scarce and nigh impossible, as public areas often prohibit loitering or sleeping in a vehicle for too long. This will result in fines and tickets averaging \$65, a price that will increase dramatically with each subsequent offense. Neighborhoods or spaces nearby private property will often deny or report the homeless in their space, either for concerns of crime or maintaining property value. Lastly, traveling frequently to resolve or dodge these issues equates to higher gasoline usage. And I'm sure everyone is well aware of the unstable,

rising costs of gas as well. However, the greatest danger of vehicular residency is its shaky legal boundaries.

When reviewing government tax or insurance papers, notice that vehicular residency is not a documented living scenario. This isn't merely an overlooked exclusion; it means that this lifestyle disqualifies individuals from relief programs, and you may often need to lie about your residency for benefits. And because this living scenario is so undocumented, there are very limited legal protections involving it as well. Returning to the police and parking example, every time a vehicle is fined, it is recorded on a database that leads to higher ticket costs, denial of registration, and even having the owner's vehicle impounded with little defense. While there aren't any federal laws that prevent a person from sleeping in a vehicle on a public street, state laws can massively vary on how anti-loitering laws can be enforced. Each state comes with their own legal complications and necessary reading for a vehicular resident to survive. The absolute worst-case scenario involves families who are concerned that child support services will deem their residency unsustainable and take their children away.

The purpose of these loitering laws is to incentivize the homeless into government programs and shelters, but the lack of accessibility severely damages perceptions of them, such as the limited considerations toward the disabled, pet owners, and the mentally ill. Because the vehicular homeless are people who have only recently entered this lifestyle, stigmas about the homeless being insane and dangerous make it difficult for most people to live with them voluntarily. The validity of those claims depends on the shelter and community, but it is an unfortunate reality that women and children must be constantly cautious and weigh their safety and privacy first.

None of these issues bring up the additional discomfort of limited space, public perception, and sheer isolation that owners will have to experience. All of which will deteriorate the high-stress decision-making required for this lifestyle, creating more mistakes and more expenses. Much like living on the streets, the vehicular homeless will feel constantly unwelcome and require lucky connections or good Samaritans to let them stay in a parking space.

So, is it all just doom and gloom with vehicular residency? Not entirely. While there are no real solutions to solve the stigmatic issues of the state and its neighbors toward the vehicular homeless, it is also a large enough group that plenty of experience, information, and legislative efforts exist to combat this problem. There are many websites, that I will link below that can offer tons of tips on how to tackle this lifestyle, from how to properly maintain your vehicle for maximum comfort or safety as well as recommend safe parking zones. On that topic, Safe Parking Programs are being slowly implemented by several states in public areas where the homeless can temporarily stay to recover mentally and find employment. Offering months of access to community parking space, case management, and living amenities such as food storage or bathrooms. The Vehicular Residency Research Project in Seattle University is also

taking cautious care to create a clear definition for vehicular residency and those who can qualify for legal protections.

Vehicular homelessness and entering these rabbit holes of issues is daunting, and you'll likely come to antagonize everyone and see no escape. But if you can keep yourself informed about all this, you'll find the right strategies, places, and people that can make your impossible situation okay.

### **Recommended Reading and Sources:**

State laws on Loitering/Sleeping in a Vehicle

<https://smartfinancial.com/is-it-illegal-to-sleep-in-your-car>

Advice on Vehicular Homelessness

<https://www.motorbiscuit.com/is-sleeping-in-your-car-on-a-residential-street-illegal/>

Safe Parking Programs Act:

<https://endhomelessness.org/legislation/safe-parking-programs-act-h-r-2965/>

Living Expenses of RVs vs Apartment Rent

<https://lodgescout.com/rv-vs-apartment/>

<https://digitalcommons.law.seattleu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=hrap>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paW3k4OE8XA&ab\\_channel=InvisiblePeople](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=paW3k4OE8XA&ab_channel=InvisiblePeople)

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10511482.2022.2117990>

<https://sfbayview.com/2018/08/cooking-in-your-car-the-rise-of-the-unhoused-middle-class/>

<https://quickhaven.com/solutions-to-homelessness/why-homeless-people-avoid-shelters#:~:text=Lack%20of%20Availability,like%20protection%20for%20the%20night.>