What Do Three Comparable Communities Spend Responding to Homelessness?

Executive Summary — Spokane County, WA · Sedgwick County (Wichita), KS · Ada County (Boise), ID | Best-efforts comparison, FY2024–25 | June 12, 2026

Method in one line: every dollar of dedicated homelessness-system operating spending (shelter, outreach, rapid rehousing/PSH operations, prevention, administration) is counted once, at the administering entity, by original source. Housing subsidy (Spokane ~$75–95M SHA pass-through / ~$20M / ~$18M) and behavioral-health/public-safety costs are tracked as separate layers, not in the headline.

FY2024–25	Spokane County, WA	Sedgwick County (Wichita), KS	Ada County (Boise), ID
County population (2024)	555,947	536,081	557,590
2025 PIT count (unsheltered)	1,806 (617)	736 (195)	772 (126)
Homeless per 10,000 residents	32.5	13.7	13.8
HUD CoC award (Definition A)	$6.33M	$3.22M	$2.60M
Government homelessness spending (Definition B — headline)	**~$30.9M**	**~$6.3M**	**~$7.1M**
of which recurring (one-time removed)	~$21.9M	~$6.1M	~$4.6M
Estimated private philanthropy (net of public pass-throughs)	~$17.1M*	~$10.8M	~$19.2M
Total estimated system spending	**~$48.0M***	**~$17.1M**	**~$26.2M**
Government $ per county resident	**~$56**	**~$12**	**~$13**
Total estimated $ per county resident	**~$86***	**~$32**	**~$47**
Recurring government $ per county resident	~$39	~$11	~$8
Government $ per PIT-counted person	~$17,100	~$8,600	~$9,200
Total estimated $ per PIT-counted person	~$26,600*	~$23,200	~$34,000
One-time / capital (multi-year, excluded above)	~$32.8M	~$32.0M	~$21.2M

**Spokane private figure is an infrastructure-based estimate (band $13–20M): UGM (~$8.5M, ~300 sheltered/night, files no Form 990), Catholic Charities private gifts (~$2.5M of $7.55M total), Family Promise (~$1.8M, verified 990), VOA, Salvation Army, Truth Ministries and smaller providers — calibrated against peer rescue missions with published financials.*

Five findings

- **The public-spending gap is real and large.** Spokane governments spend ~4–5x what Wichita or Boise governments spend — ~$56 per resident vs ~$12–13. The gap survives removal of one-time money (~$21.9M vs ~$6.1M vs ~$4.6M recurring).
- **Need is higher in Spokane — but not 4–5x higher.** Spokane's homeless population is ~2.4x the others' in absolute and per-capita terms (32.5 vs ~13.7–13.8 per 10,000), and far more visible: 11.1 unsheltered per 10,000 residents vs 3.6 (Wichita) and 2.3 (Boise).
- **State policy structure explains much of the gap.** Washington supplies recurring state money (Consolidated Homeless Grant, HEN, document-recording fees) with no Kansas or Idaho equivalent. Idaho appropriates $0 state general fund for homelessness; Kansas denied Wichita's request for state shelter funding. Spokane's higher spending is substantially a state-funding difference, not purely a local choice.
- **Philanthropy converges the totals — what differs is composition.** Total estimated spending per resident: ~$86 / ~$32 / ~$47. Spokane's system is ~2/3 public; Boise's ~3/4 private; Wichita's ~2/3 private. Spokane's philanthropy network is larger than Wichita's in absolute terms, yet covers a homeless population 2.4x the size. Spokane also has by far the largest housing-subsidy layer (SHA ~$75–95M; Catholic Housing's ~3,100 units), tracked separately.
- **Every system faces a funding cliff.** The withdrawn-and-enjoined FY25 HUD NOFO (and proposed ~30% permanent-housing cap) puts Spokane's ~87–90% PH portfolio at risk (~$2–3.5M Catholic Charities exposure alone); Boise's entire CoC layer (~$2.7M) was still unfunded as of June 2026; Wichita's new shelter campus loses ~$2.5M/yr of ARPA money. One-time money (~$33M / ~$32M / ~$21M over 2022–26) makes any single-year snapshot misleading without the recurring baseline.

Which denominator? Per resident vs. per person counted

The case for per capita. The PIT count is not a neutral denominator — it is an outcome of the very system being measured. Dividing dollars by PIT builds in a perverse logic: a community that successfully reduces homelessness watches its $-per-person ratio rise and looks inefficient, while one whose count balloons looks underfunded. Population, by contrast, is outside the homelessness system's control. Per-resident spending is therefore the cleaner measure of community effort: if spending were equally effective across communities, similar per-capita effort should, over time, produce similar rates of homelessness. On that test, Spokane's position is stark — roughly 4–5x the public effort per resident, with 2.4x the homelessness.

The case for caution. Equal effectiveness would not automatically produce equal PIT rates, because the inflow into homelessness is driven substantially by forces the response system does not control: rent levels, vacancy rates, housing supply, poverty, migration, and state behavioral-health policy. The strongest research on regional variation (Colburn & Aldern, Homelessness Is a Housing Problem) finds housing-market conditions explain differences between cities far better than local policy choices do. Per-PIT spending also retains real meaning as a measure of resource intensity per person currently in crisis — useful for judging whether a system is resourced to serve the caseload it actually has.

In this particular comparison, the structural caveat mostly cuts against Boise — which deepens the puzzle. If housing costs were driving these differences, Boise should look worst: it has the highest home values (~$512K county median vs ~$411K Spokane, ~$203K Sedgwick) and the highest rents (~$1,577 vs ~$1,283 / ~$998). Instead Boise posts the lowest unsheltered rate (2.3 per 10,000) on the lowest public effort (~$13 per resident). The structural factors that are measurable do not rescue Spokane's numbers; the ones that might (migration patterns, drug-market differences, state behavioral-health systems, regional service-magnet effects) are real but hard to quantify. That unexplained Boise result is arguably the most important research question this project has surfaced.

Reverse causality runs both ways. Spending follows need: Spokane spends more partly because it has more homelessness, and Washington's state funding formulas respond to measured need. So neither ratio — per resident or per PIT — is a clean efficiency measure on its own. The defensible framing is a pair: per-capita spending as the EFFORT measure, and homelessness per 10,000 residents (especially unsheltered per 10,000) as the OUTCOME measure.

Read as effort vs. outcome: Spokane — highest effort (~$86 total, ~$56 public per resident), worst outcome (32.5 homeless and 11.1 unsheltered per 10,000). Wichita — lowest effort (~$32 per resident), middling outcome (13.7 and 3.6). Boise — moderate total effort (~$47, but only ~$13 of it public), best outcome (13.8 and 2.3) despite the region's most expensive housing market.

What this framing cannot tell you. It cannot distinguish poor effectiveness from harder inflow, a multi-year backlog, or counting differences — PIT methodologies vary across CoCs in rigor and coverage, and a better-executed count can raise a community's number. It also cannot capture timing: today's spending meets a population shaped by years of prior inflow, and Spokane's 2024–25 figures still carry one-time surge money. The next phase of work — composition of spending (shelter-heavy vs PSH-heavy), system design, inflow analysis, and outcome trends over multiple years — is where causation questions can actually be engaged.

How to use these numbers

Best-efforts estimates from HUD award files, adopted budgets, state grant records, provider 990s, and SBA provider memos (May 2026); line-item detail, sources, estimate flags, and double-count controls are in the companion workbook. "~" figures carry estimate bands — defensible at the level of magnitude and ratio, not to the dollar.