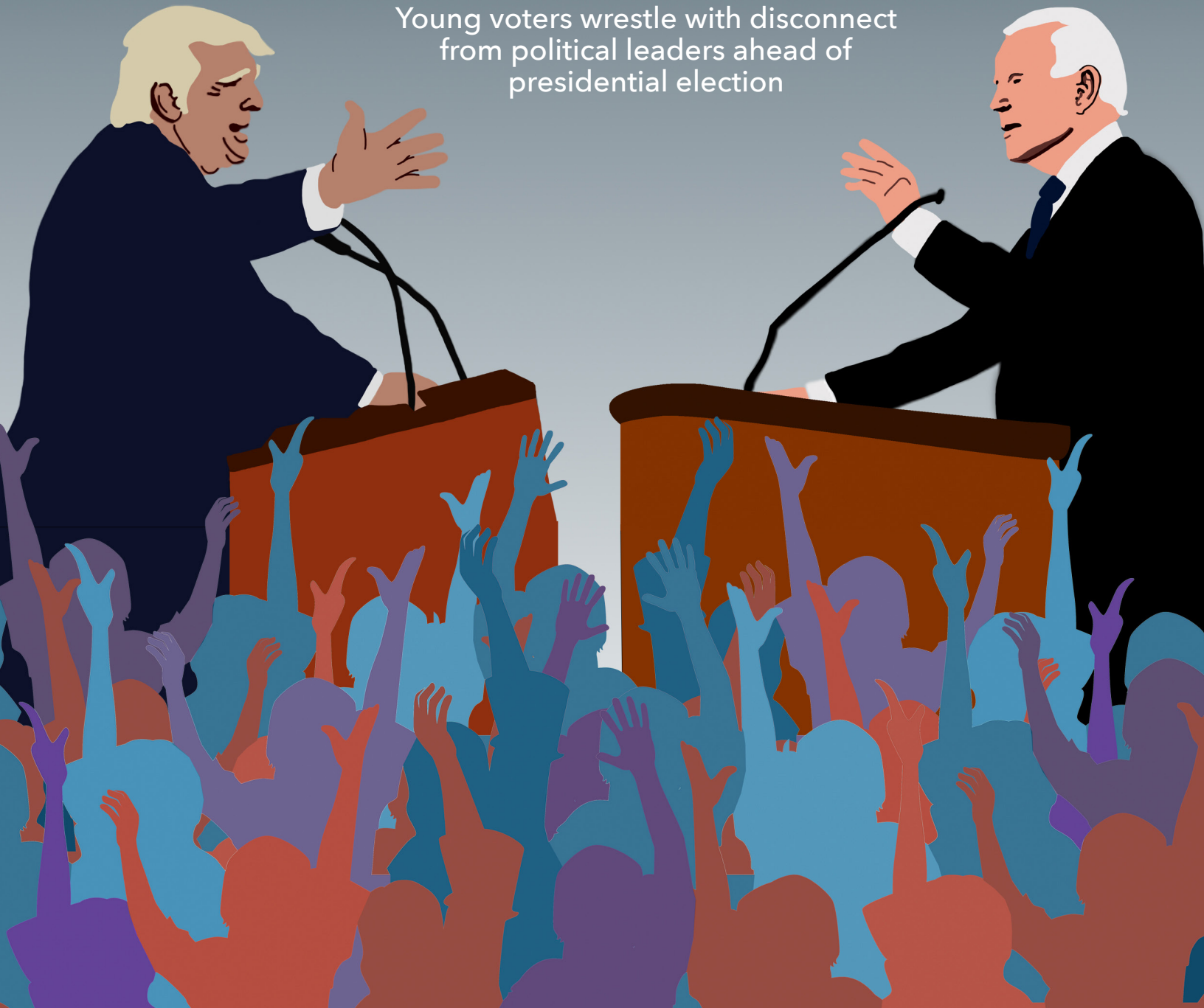


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CAN THEY HEAR US?

Young voters wrestle with disconnect
from political leaders ahead of
presidential election





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JORDAN MILLER/OU DAILY

Snow falls on a bench outside of Kaufman Hall, home of the OU Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Linguistics.

FACULTY DEFEND LANGUAGE DEGREES

Amid national decline, OU retains general education requirements

BY ANUSHA FATHEPURE • ANUSHA.FATHEPURE@OU.EDU

Faculty, administration and students of OU's language studies department and programs weighed in on the national decline of collegiate language programs and their value to students' education.

Total college and university enrollments in languages other than English dropped by 16.6% between fall 2016 and fall 2021, according to a 2023 report from the Modern Language Association. Between 2016 and 2021, total

college and university enrollments fell by 8%, half the amount that language enrollments fell.

In August, West Virginia University, the state's largest public university, faced intense scrutiny after university leaders recommended dissolving its department of world languages, literatures and linguistics and cutting 7% of its faculty. The proposal was part of a larger package of cuts to academic programs that West Virginia University said is needed to close

a \$45 million annual budget deficit.

After extensive pushback from scholars and the community, West Virginia University did not completely dissolve the department but eliminated bachelor's programs in Chinese studies, French, German studies, Russian studies and Spanish, as well as master's programs in linguistics and TESOL certification, or teaching English as a second language to non-native speakers. The university retained



RACHEL NICHOLS/OU DAILY

"The Pan American Family," a mural by Mexican artist Emilio Amero in the stairwell of Kaufman Hall.

some faculty members to continue instruction in Spanish and Chinese.

According to the OU Fact Book, as of fall 2022, there are 171 undergraduate students majoring in the modern languages, literatures and linguistics department, an 18% decline from 2021. Compared to pre-pandemic numbers in 2019, enrollment has dropped 33%.

"In the wake of the pandemic, enrollments in languages have gone way down, and at the

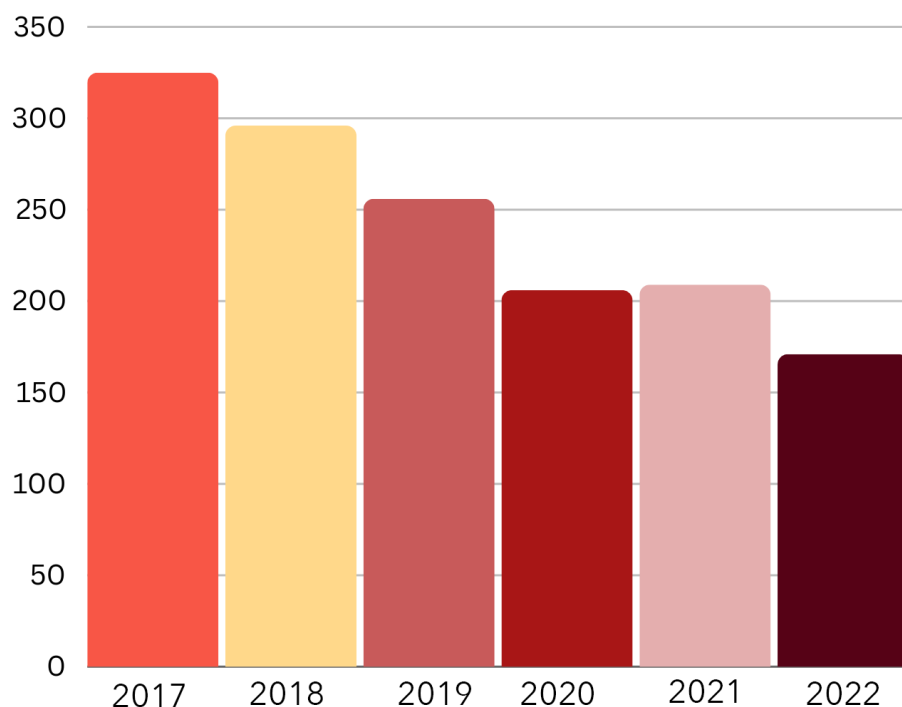
upper levels, we've probably lost nationally about a third of enrollment in the past five years," Joseph Sullivan, assistant chair of modern languages, literatures and linguistics, said. "We're doing, actually, a lot better than most of our peer institutions. We've seen the decreases too, but they haven't been as severe here."

According to a Modern Language Association report, despite decline in enrollment, OU's Department of Modern Languages, Literatures

and Linguistics was profiled as one of the most successful departments nationwide.

According to the report, OU saw enrollment drops consistent with nationwide declines, but some languages, such as Italian, dipped less than 5%. The report attributed OU's success to administrative support, collaborative efforts overseas and the department's success with internships, scholarships and capstone projects.

Students enrolled in OU's Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Linguistics



CONNIE WIGGINS/OU DAILY

"We're actually fairly optimistic that we're gonna maintain (our success) and hopefully grow in the next five years," Sullivan said.

Sullivan said increasing retention in language studies begins by encouraging students at the start of their language education.

In recent years, universities have transitioned to be more career-oriented, focusing on providing programs and career services to help students find job success after graduation.

In November, the OU Board of Regents approved several academic program modifications aimed at addressing workforce needs across the state. Over the past year, OU has poured funding and resources into the Career Center in order to better serve students.

Sullivan estimated 80% of students start a language to fulfill a degree requirement. He said most OU degrees require three semesters of a language, so instructors try to emphasize in that time the personal and professional benefits of a foreign language.

"From day one, we start talking to our students about thinking about staying past the requirements of the language," Sullivan said. "Especially in that third semester, we really try to get (students) for a little bit longer and tell them about all the opportunities (they) can

have with another language."

Sullivan said study abroad programs encourage students to continue with language studies and allow them unique opportunities to get involved.

"Going to a country where you won't be able to speak the language just opens up your mind so much more. So it would be nice to see some of the priority ... being put more into exchanges that send students to countries where they can practice their foreign language," Sullivan said.

However, he said many students who want to study abroad are unable to because of the cost.

OU has several study abroad programs including international study centers in Italy and Mexico, faculty-led programs, partner university programs and partner provider programs. There are various department-specific scholarships as well as university scholarships, national scholarships and financial aid to fund travel and living fees.

Looking to the future, Sullivan said he hopes the department can grow its scholarship funding and help students experience the opportunities studying abroad can provide.

Nian Liu, chair of OU's Department

of Modern Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, said languages help students understand and form cultural connections.

Liu, a cognitive linguist, said every language retells the same event differently because of the language structure, so there are multiple ways to describe the same event. These various descriptions can be related to the language's culture of origin.

"The example I always give to my students is about the kinship terms in Chinese," Liu said. "(In) English, ... there's this word 'uncle.' There's no direct translation into Chinese because we have to specify this as father's side or mother's side, and are they older than your father or younger than your father, uncle by blood or uncle by marriage. So this just shows how important the societal relationship or family relationship is to Chinese people."

She said understanding how language reflects the values and beliefs of a culture can broaden students' perspectives and help them become more open-minded.

Justin Cobb, a fifth-year senior majoring in Chinese and world language education, said learning languages changes the way people think.

"Our brain gets hardwired differently when we speak a different language," Cobb said. "We view the world differently, our personalities are different, measurably. Having our brain being wired with more than one pathway of language, that allows us to be sharper into our old age."

According to a 2023 study in the journal *Neurobiology of Aging*, bilingualism improves memory later in life and protects against dementia and cognitive decline in older individuals. Studying hundreds of older adult patients, researchers found those who reported speaking two languages daily from a young age scored higher on tests of learning, memory and language than patients who spoke only one language.

Cobb is studying abroad through the partner university exchange program with OU at La Universidad de Alcalá, just outside of Madrid, Spain. He said studying abroad has completely immersed him in Spanish culture and allowed him to improve his Spanish in a way he couldn't if he hadn't lived in Madrid.

"The social part of it too, is that we live in a world that's so globalized, and if you look at the University of Oklahoma, how many international students do we have?" Cobb said. "They're from all over the world. We have so many people from so many different backgrounds that if you don't speak a second language, or you don't attempt to, you're closing yourself off, and you don't have the opportunity to meet new people, to see different perspectives."

Dane Poolaw, a Kiowa language instructor with the OU Department of Native American



RACHEL NICHOLS/OU DAILY

The Education Abroad office in Farzaneh Hall, also home to the David L. Boren College of International Studies and International Student Services.

Studies, said language can help students feel connected to their heritage. Poolaw said, especially in Oklahoma, many people have ancestral ties to local tribes.

"It's so important when they do take these classes, it does actually help our tribes back at home because they're actually contributing to reversing tribal language loss within our communities," Poolaw said.

According to the Administration for Native Americans, there are 245 distinct Indigenous languages in the United States, but 65 are already extinct and 75 are nearing that point.

OU is one of the few universities in the

nation that offers a comprehensive range of Indigenous language courses. Courses offered include Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, Kiowa and Potawatomi.

Poolaw said learning and understanding Indigenous languages can also help with intertribal relations.

"When you're dealing with tribal members, they're more open to seeing somebody else's point of view, they're more open to probably trying new things," Poolaw said. "It really helps in relationships, speaking in somebody else's language. Oftentimes, they're happy that you've made the attempt."

Liu said learning languages has instrumental benefits for students and there are various personal elements that can enrich a student's education.

"Some people might think that language learning is learning the grammar of this language, ... but for us, language and literature education is more than that. It's about intercultural awareness and how you can become a global citizen," Liu said. "You're not just learning a language, you're learning the culture behind it, you're getting to know the people. You're going to get a shared perspective of how they view this world."

CAN THEY HEAR US?

YOUNG VOTERS WRESTLE WITH DISCONNECT FROM POLITICAL LEADERS AHEAD OF PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

BY ISMAEL LELE •
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RAY BAHNER/OU DAILY

When young voters hit the polls for the first time in 2020, they watched the United States undergo one of the most controversial and polarizing elections in recent history. In the race, political engagement reached historic heights with the highest voter turnout in history since 1900.

The end result of the race between former President Donald J. Trump and current President Joe Biden didn't mitigate partisan tensions. As college-age voters gear up for the 2024 election, partisanship has only grown and trust in candidates continues to dwindle, leaving the younger generations with a melancholic view on national politics.

In total, 40.8 million people aged 18-27 will be eligible to vote in 2024, 8 million of which will vote for the first time, according to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement. In 2020, about 50% of young voters across the nation

voted in the presidential election, but in Oklahoma, this number was 34%.

As of February, Biden and Trump are the likely front-runners to compete in the general election. Despite their initial race resulting in the highest voter turnout this century, both Biden and Trump stand as two of the most unpopular candidates in the nation's history, a sentiment that has grown in recent months and could affect the turnout in younger demographics.

"That's really fueling the divide that we're seeing because there are so many people that maybe don't identify with either of those two or are outright disgusted by the both of them that they're left out there," said Cale Greenroyd, treasurer of OU College Republicans.

When Biden emerged as the Democratic candidate in 2020, Trump struggled to address national concerns regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the protests in

response to the murder of George Floyd.

Trump launched another bid for reelection on Nov. 14 and he has remained the front-runner to win the Republican primary. Since the race for the Republican primaries began in September, Trump has declined to participate in any debate against his competitors due to polls consistently indicating he will represent the Republican Party.

Candidates like Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis and former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley made efforts to oust Trump but have only made marginal gains in their attempt at swaying the party from Trump's influence. However, Haley has yet to give up as she continues to gain traction with younger voters by offering them a moderate alternative to Trump.

With DeSantis out and Haley struggling to make significant gains, polls indicate that the first presidential rematch since 1956 will possibly take place in this year's upcoming

election between Biden and Trump, showcasing a trend of limited choices as more young voters continue to reach voting age.

Trump defeated former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton in the 2016 election, winning the electoral college 304 to 227 despite losing the popular vote by 2.86 million. The 2016 election, in contrast to 2020, had one of the lowest voter turnout results of the past 20 years.

In order to win the presidential election, a candidate must win 270 electoral votes. Each state is allocated a set number of electoral votes depending on the number of senators and representatives it has. A candidate wins electoral votes by winning in a state via popular vote.

Of voters aged 18-29, 58% voted for Clinton in 2016, 72% voted Democrat in the 2018 midterms, 59% voted for Biden in 2020 and 63% voted Democrat in 2022.

Among registered voters who chose not to vote in 2016, 25% said it was due to their dislike of the candidates or campaign issues. It is the same voter apathy that people believe contributed to Trump's win over Clinton that many fear will rear its head again in 2024.

Since losing in 2020, Trump has faced dozens of legal charges ranging from attempts at overturning the 2020 election, possession of classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate, falsified business records and civil cases involving accusations of sexual abuse.

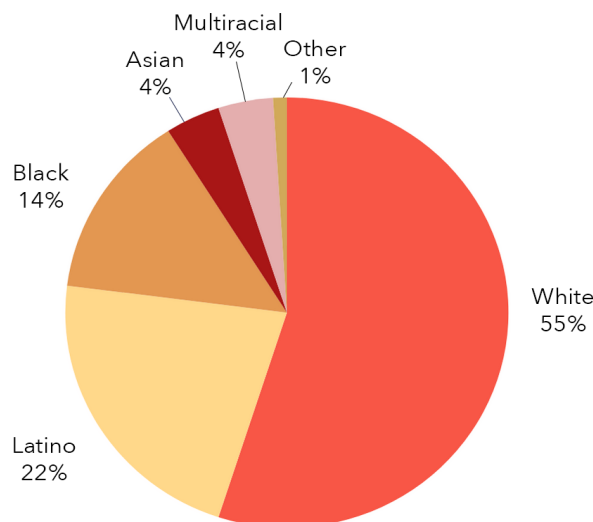
In December, CNBC reported Biden reached an approval rating of 37.7%, the lowest rating of any president at that point in their first term since 1948. Many have attributed the low rating to the Biden administration's failure to deliver on promises such as student loan forgiveness, protections for bodily autonomy and unethical foreign policy during its first three years.

"It's not going to be a landslide or anything like that," Alex Ignatow, vice president of the OU College Democrats, said. "Young people are going to have an important role this time around, like a very important role, but it really just depends on their choice of whether they want to go and vote or if they want to sit it out."

Young voters have increasingly grown agitated by the age of the politicians in office, questioning their ability to effectively serve as commander-in-chief and other positions of power. Biden, 81, is the oldest president in the nation's history, a title he held when he took office at 78. Trump is 77 and was 70 when he took office in 2016.

"People really aren't happy that we're gonna have another Trump-Biden rematch," Anthony Diulio, chair of the OU

Potential U.S. voters aged 18-27 in 2024



CONNIE WIGGINS/OU DAILY

College Republicans, said. "We're pretty much sleepwalking into it."

Young voters and the two-party system

A New York Times poll released in November projects Nevada, Georgia, Arizona, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin to be the most pivotal states in the election. The poll that was updated in December shows that Biden is losing five of the six swing states, with Wisconsin as the sole exception.

Michael Crespin, an OU political science professor, said battleground states help determine the winner of presidential elections because they don't typically stick to one party each election cycle. The uncertainty of swing states results in lots of money poured into campaigning by candidates in an effort to secure more votes.

"You're gonna have some states where it's gonna be close," Crespin said.

Nate Cohn, New York Times chief political analyst, reported in November that, among battleground states, Nevada shows the most cause for alarm for Biden as he is showing weakness among young and non-white voters.

Biden's weakness with young voters, especially those of color, is not a trend unique to Nevada, but can be observed nationally as well. Across the country, young voters who may have never voted in a presidential election, are fatigued with the deep political division in the U.S.

A survey of over 4,000 young adults conducted by the Institute for Citizens & Scholars in August found that 57% of voters aged 18-24 are dissatisfied with American democracy and 33% have no intention of

participating in the presidential election.

Historically, minorities and young voters have shown up to the polls in support of Democratic candidates, but Biden's presidency has done little to combat voter apathy. Of the 40.8 million eligible voters aged 18-27, 45% are people of color, according to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

Just over half of the 40.8 million voters aged 18-27 are white, 22% are Latino, 14% are Black, 4% are Asian and 4% are multiracial. Of the newly eligible voters 18-19, 53% are white, 23% are Latino, 13% are Black, 5% are multiracial and 4% are Asian.

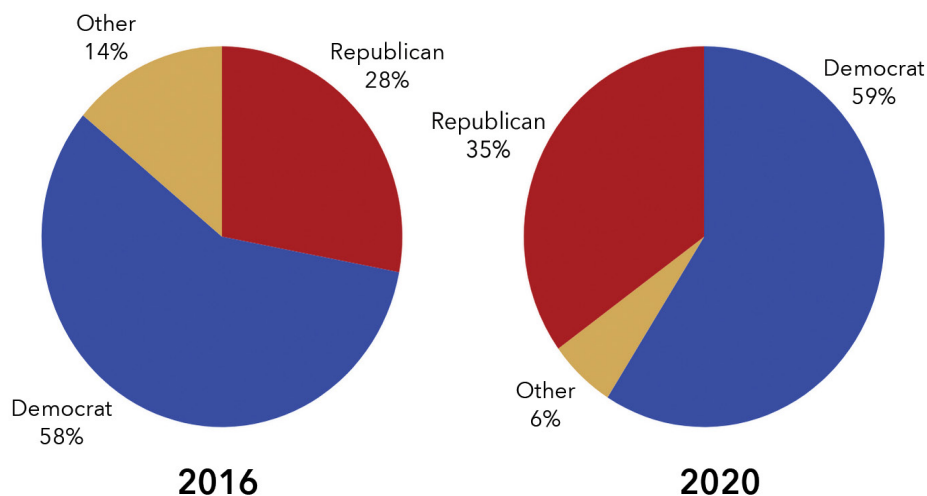
Abraar Hassany, a Pakistani-American junior pre-med student and socialist organizer at OU, said he and other minorities are not only uninterested in Biden, but the Democratic Party as a whole.

The reason why Democrats may be losing a portion of their voting demographics varies depending on race. According to the New York Times survey, Black and Latino voters are becoming increasingly frustrated with the current state of the economy. According to Hassany, Arab and Middle Eastern voters are hesitant to vote due to Biden's foreign policy in the Middle East.

"The Democrats have never been our party. They have been something we've had to attach ourselves to because, I mean, this is a two-party system, and the Republicans have been just demonstrably worse," Hassany said. "And that's such a common thing among, I think, minority groups in America having to tether yourself to the Democrats."

Crespin said each age bracket has been increasing in voter turnout, but younger

Presidential election votes by voters aged 18-29



CONNIE WIGGINS/OU DAILY

voters have historically turned out in low numbers, usually because young adults have to balance school, work and other commitments.

In 2022, 40.1% of Oklahoma's eligible voter base participated in the election that decided the state's governor and superintendent of public instruction, 6.5% lower than the national average. Among voters aged 18-24, 20% participated.

Young voters, who may be hesitant to show up for Biden, have seen the past three years of his presidency result in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, both failed and successful attempts to forgive student loan debt and a ban on affirmative action nationwide. All while billions of dollars in military aid was and is being sent to foreign conflicts such as the war in Ukraine and the Israel-Hamas war, furthering the divide and polarization between young voters.

In the past few months, college campuses have seen protests both in support of Israel and Palestinian resistance, which has put universities at crossroads regarding who to publicly support. Harvard University's president recently resigned after accusations of tolerating antisemitism on campus. Her resignation served as an example of administrators struggling to navigate rising tensions on college campuses.

Affirmative action has been banned in Oklahoma since 2012, and there have been recent restrictions and pushback against diversity, equity and inclusion programming in Texas and Oklahoma as well as hard-core conservative legislation in Florida with the banning of critical race theory.

As conservative legislation continues to pass, the notion that the wants and needs

of young voters will not be met whether it be a Republican or Democrat standing at the head of the nation has only gained credibility.

"I say your typical young voter might be like, 'OK Trump, he doesn't represent me at all, but kind of neither does Biden, so maybe I'm just gonna stay home and not turn out,'" Crespin said.

While Norman may not be as conservative as more rural parts of the state, the Democratic Party is doing little to sway young voters in Oklahoma. Registered independents in Oklahoma aged 18-24 are currently outnumbering registered Democrats of the same age range by over 16,000.

Crespin said because Oklahoma is a red state, its electoral votes almost always go to the Republican candidate, making voters who are independent or Democrat more inclined not to vote in the presidential election.

"The general trend is just toward depoliticization," Hassany said. "Biden's presidency as a whole, which has been up and down, has transformed people toward maybe a little bit more of a working class orientation. But what we're not seeing is that happening at the federal level."

At OU, both Democratic and Republican student leaders expressed their reservations about a rematch between Trump and Biden, a contest that they believe has contributed to a trend of voter disengagement.

Both members of the OU College Republicans and College Democrats acknowledged the growing resentment for the two-party system.

"While I have my personal feelings about Joe Biden, I think that regardless, he is still

the best candidate for presidency," Colin McPherson, chief of staff of the OU College Democrats, said.

Diulio told OU Daily that he was a staunch supporter of DeSantis and would have also preferred a Democratic candidate other than Biden to run against him. Despite this, Diulio said he believes in Trump and his ability to enact policies such as the Abraham Accords, reworking the North American free trade agreement and his stance on immigration.

"I do think that Trump was a very good president. We can disagree on his rhetoric, but I think policy wise, he was very excellent," Diulio said.

In terms of how the organizations' leaders view political counterparts, both expressed strong beliefs that the opposing party is trending toward extremism.

McPherson said moderate Republicans have become complacent in reaction to Republican extremism out of fear of being alienated from their party, which has allowed Republicans to continue to exacerbate social issues and increase polarization.

On the other side, Diulio believes the Democratic Party has not properly addressed social concerns regarding what is taught in schools, as well as issues in foreign policy.

A growing sentiment among students who are not aligned with either side is that Democrats and Republicans are two sides of the same coin.

"The Democratic voting base and the Republican voting base is quite different," Hassany said. "And they see themselves differently. Whereas the Republicans and Democrats as politicians are incredibly similar, especially within the last 30 years, or 40 years," Hassany said.

Israel-Palestine

According to Crespin, presidential approval ratings can be seen more as a measure of the present-day partisanship between parties rather than a strong determinant of who may win or lose.

As of January, Biden has an approval rating of 39.8%, a number that has been trending downward in recent months. And with rising tensions in the Middle East, members of Generation Z have questioned Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war.

On Oct. 7, Hamas, a militant group that controls the Gaza Strip, attacked and killed over 1,200 Israeli residents and kidnapped over 200 hostages. Hamas breached the Israeli-made blockade on Gaza's borders and engaged in a ground attack in response to a conflict that spans decades.

Since Oct. 7, the U.S. has sent billions of

dollars in military aid to Israel in an effort to eliminate Hamas and retrieve Israeli hostages taken into Gaza. Israel has faced accusations of war crimes in their pursuit of Hamas leaders through the use of collective punishment on the citizens of Gaza.

South Africa recently went to the International Court of Justice to accuse Israel of genocidal intent toward the Palestinians in Gaza. South Africa has historically been sympathetic to Palestinians due to the country's history with apartheid.

According to Save the Children, a global organization that promotes the rights and protections of children, almost half of Gaza's population is made up of children. On Jan. 21, PBS reported that over 25,000 Palestinians have been killed since Oct. 7.

A study conducted in November by Hart Research Associates/Public Opinion Strategies in conjunction with NBC News found that 70% of registered voters aged 18-34 disagree with Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war.

"(Israel and the U.S.) label this terrorism and then engage in some kind of brutal counterterrorism operation that involves the absolute no distinction between civilians and combatants," Hassany said. "To the Israelis, this isn't the Israeli-Hamas war. This is the Israel-Palestine war."

College campuses saw a surge in protests against Biden's support of Israel alongside calls for a ceasefire.

On Oct. 19, Imad Enchassi, a Palestinian who grew up as a refugee in Lebanon, spoke at an event held by the OU Muslim Student Association about the Israel-Hamas war. There, he told OU Daily how his life has changed since Oct. 7.

"I had family; they're dead. Four of them died yesterday (Oct. 18). A father, a mother, a son and a daughter-in-law, all four of them were found dead under the house," Enchassi said. "They're not terrorists. They're not. They're just ordinary family that took refuge in their house and, you know, what Israel would call collateral damage."

In recent elections, young voters have voted Democrat. According to an NBC News exit poll in 2020, Biden led Trump 60% to 36% among voters aged 18-29. That margin has greatly decreased in recent months, with the New York Times reporting in November Biden leads Trump 47% to 46%.

"Biden has to live in the political world where he knows like, 'Alright, I might lose some of the young voters on the far left. They don't turn out as much. So I gotta move to the middle and think about (the) people who are there,'" Crespin said.

Crespin said defeating the presidential incumbent has been a rare feat and even now,



RAY BAHNER/OU DAILY

OK Votes sign during OU's Admitted Student Day in March.

with support for Biden trending downward, Trump would need to earn more votes than he did in 2020 to retake the White House.

Though Trump may have made gains in the young voter base, the change has had less to do with any conservative shift, but rather a growing sense of discomfort with the Democratic Party and its hesitancy to call for a ceasefire in Gaza.

"I do think that is alienating younger voters, but I don't think that should be something that stops younger voters from getting involved in politics," McPherson said. "People should, you know, really push themselves to develop a comprehensive knowledge of our political landscape."

Voter engagement

Crespin advised young voters not to disregard the voting process even if they view both candidates as unfit for the job. Instead, he said, look at what else may be on the ballot for the election, such as seats in Congress.

"You can pick and choose what you want to vote (for)," Crespin said. "The presidential ballot, we say, is at the top of the ticket because it's literally the first thing on there, it's at the top, and like, everything else just follows."

McPherson was adamant about voting and paying attention to political positions other than the president. They said when it comes to Biden's failures, such as student loan forgiveness and protections against bodily autonomy, Biden's attempts at upholding campaign promises were thwarted

by Congress and a conservative majority in the Supreme Court.

"We are focusing so much on what the presidential election looks like that we're not looking enough into who is running for Congress, who are these people that are trying to become our representatives, become our senators," McPherson said.

Crespin said it's common that people will vote for the president and ignore everything else on the ballot. Other elections, such as midterms and local positions, are also often ignored.

Hassany explained that for many young voters with foreign families and backgrounds, local politics is not something they pay attention to, but when it comes time to decide a new president, eyes are drawn because presidents have the power to affect their families that may reside across borders.

Elections are drawing closer as the political divide among parties increases and young voters and minorities grow more hesitant to participate in a system they believe does not work in their best interest. All the while, efforts to promote civic engagement have hinged on the idea that the lesser of two evils is one's only choice when it comes to voting.

"The number one thing we have to do is fix this depoliticization issue we've been talking about, and that is not something individuals do. That is something that is a product of larger societal trends," Hassany said.



REGHAN KYLE/OU DAILY

The Melvin C. Hall Leadership-Scholarship Award recipient Saramarie Azzun during the campus awards program on April 14.

DEI IN THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE

OU medical students seek to preserve diversity in health care

BY MADDY KEYES • MADELEINE.E.KEYES-1@OU.EDU

As a graduate student at the OU-Tulsa School of Community Medicine, Saramarie Azzun spends an average of 16 hours in classes, 20 hours studying, four hours shadowing physicians at Tulsa medical clinics and two hours working at the nonprofit Take Control Initiative each week.

She said she hopes to become a family medicine physician, providing culturally relevant care to patients from disadvantaged communities.

But now, amid a wave of nationwide attacks on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives in higher education, Azzun has the additional responsibility of running the Black Student Association at OU-Tulsa, an organization she created on Jan. 29 to carve out a space for Black students in the School of Community Medicine.

Azzun expects to spend at least five hours a week managing BSA, bringing her weekly

workload up to 47 hours — seven hours more than the average full-time job.

“When I came (to OU-Tulsa), I was hoping for that support of DEI and in having them bring a community that looks like me together,” said Azzun. “What the DEI ban did was place that burden on the students.”

In the past year, OU campuses have been forced to comply with legislation restricting the use of DEI initiatives. In June, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down its decision in *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. Harvard*, which prohibits universities from considering race as a factor in its admissions. In December, Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt signed an executive order calling for a formal review of DEI in Oklahoma higher education to be completed by May 31.

For students like Azzun who are pursuing careers in medicine, this potential scaleback of university DEI programs and support has

caused stress and sparked fears of decreased class diversity and academic success. This, Azzun added, could impact the quality of care their future patients will receive.

“As future physicians, we want to be able to treat a diverse patient population,” Azzun said, noting some studies have shown shared identities between a patient and provider can lead to higher quality care as perceived by the patient.

“I think (a DEI ban) really disadvantages future patients and disadvantages anyone in that future field,” she said

Impact of Stitt's executive order

In part, Stitt's executive order prohibits state agencies and higher education institutions from using state funds, property or resources to “grant or support diversity, equity, and inclusion positions, departments, activities, procedures, or programs to the extent they grant

preferential treatment based on one person's particular race, color, sex, ethnicity, or national origin over another's."

OU released a statement after the order was announced reaffirming its commitment to "ensuring an education from the University of Oklahoma remains accessible and available to all," and has since declared no staff would be terminated as a result of the order. OU President Joseph Harroz Jr. added that the Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, as well as other DEI offices and roles, will change their names.

However, the scope and specifics of how DEI will change at OU remain largely unclear.

"DEI (programs) are very important," said LaMauri Franklin, an undergraduate pre-med student and president of Black Girl White Coat, a volunteer and community-based student organization for Black women pursuing careers in STEM.

"If that were to be taken away, that would have a drastic negative impact on students who are pursuing any health field or any STEM field," Franklin said.

Franklin said DEI programs are a support system for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, cultivating a sense of community and providing resources for students to succeed in higher education.

According to a 2022 study by Springer Nature, social support is associated with positive outcomes in students' well-being and academic achievement, with students engaging in higher levels of social support reporting lower levels of stress.

"With students being able to find community, it really helps with morale and mental health," Azzun said. "So removing that really does a disservice to those students and future patients they're going to treat."

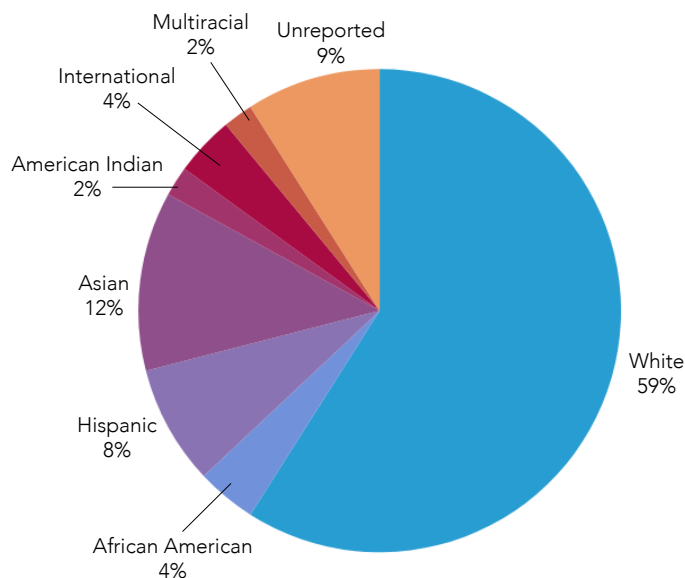
DEI programs at the OU College of Medicine include: the Diversity Alliance Task Force, which seeks to leverage the transformative power of equity and diversity through pathway programs, mentorship, faculty recruitment, research and community engagement; OUMED REV UP!, a medical school readiness program for underrepresented undergraduate students; and SPARK, a summer program for high school students with an interest in medicine.

OU Daily reached out to the OU College of Medicine and OU News for comment regarding if and how DEI offices and programs in OU's medical schools will change as a result of the executive order. The only response was Harroz's Dec. 13 statement.

Diversity at all levels

In January, a report by the Washington Examiner revealed several medical schools allegedly tried to find loopholes in the Supreme Court decision banning affirmative action to

Percent enrollment by race of students at OU Health Sciences Center colleges



TABYTHA ROA/OU DAILY

maintain a DEI focus in admissions while still technically abiding by the law, according to records obtained by Do No Harm, an organization targeting DEI in medical institutions.

These schools include the University of Houston College of Medicine, the University of Toledo, Harvard University, Virginia Commonwealth University and the University of Louisville.

When asked if OU medical schools were similarly looking for ways to promote DEI through admissions, OU News wrote, "Oklahoma state law already prohibited the consideration of race, color, sex, ethnicity, or national origin in university admissions."

Oklahoma banned affirmative action through a state question in both university admissions and public employment in 2012. According to Ballotpedia, none of the state's 13 public universities reported race as a consideration for admission.

Immediately following the Supreme Court decision in June, OU wrote in a statement to the OU Daily that the university doesn't include race as a factor in its admissions, instead considering four parts in a student's application: academic rigor and performance, engagement, an essay and letters of recommendation.

Still, according to the Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Community Engagement website, the OU College of Medicine is "committed

to advancing diversity at all levels."

"(OU College of Medicine) recognizes that the inclusion of talented individuals from different backgrounds benefits medical education, patient care, population health, and scientific discovery," according to the website.

OU News referred again to Harroz's December statement in response to a question on how the OU College of Medicine plans to continue this initiative in light of recent legislation.

In spring 2023, approximately 12% of students enrolled at OU Health Sciences Center colleges identified as Asian, 4% as African American, 8% as Hispanic, 2% as American Indian and 59% as white.

In 2020, 13% of active physicians in Oklahoma identified as Asian, 3.2% as Black or African American, 3.4% as Hispanic, 4.9% as American Indian or Alaska Native and 65.1% as white, according to an Oklahoma physician workforce profile.

"When there is a diverse population of health care professionals treating a diverse population of patients, I feel like we're able to better serve our patients, we're better able to show compassion, we're better able to show understanding," said Dawn Thejus, a chemical biosciences sophomore.

Thejus is the operations chair for the OU Minority Health Sciences Conference, an



PHOTO PROVIDED

The OU Medical Center in Oklahoma City.

annual conference that brings marginalized high schoolers from across the state to learn about careers in medicine and connect with mentors and resources.

According to a report by the Association of American Medical Colleges, studies have found doctors who cared for patients of the same race received higher scores in patient satisfaction and Black patients are more likely to follow medical recommendations after visiting Black doctors. However, the health impact of these improved interactions remains unclear.

“The more diversity we have in our health care profession, the better we are able to treat our patients,” Thejus said.

Added burden

Between the Supreme Court ruling and continued attacks on DEI in higher education, many students, like Azzun, have found themselves resuming the responsibility of fostering diversity and inclusion on campus. Registered student organizations are protected under Stitt’s executive order.

“The University of Oklahoma School of Community Medicine is still not as diverse as I would like it to be,” said Azzun, adding she is

the only Black student in her graduating class at OU-Tulsa.

Realizing university DEI programs were restricted because of the executive order and an organization for Black students didn’t exist at OU-Tulsa, Azzun created the OU-Tulsa Black Student Association in January. Azzun said BSA will begin recruiting members mid-February.

“I’ve had to go through hoops now to make a Black student organization,” Azzun said. “And as much as I enjoy bringing people together, I do think it is a school’s duty to do that. They shouldn’t place that burden on students.”

With DEI under attack by the state, members of the OU Minority Health Sciences Conference said they worry recruitment to OU and medical programs could be affected.

OU Minority Health Sciences Conference is an opportunity for marginalized high schoolers from across the state to learn about careers in medicine and resources offered at OUHSC colleges. Members said this is another way OU College of Medicine can help increase diversity within its student body and in the field of medicine.

“The whole goal of the conference is to provide the pathway (and) provide as many

resources as we can to these kids and make it as accessible as we can,” Thejus said. “But when they see that a big university like OU is also having to struggle with DEI programs, it makes it difficult for us to become more accessible to these high school kids.”

Thejus said she attended the OU Minority Health Sciences Conference on Zoom in 2021 as a senior in high school and it helped her understand her options when it comes to pursuing a career in medicine.

“Everyone has their own story. So I think this conference is a reminder that there’s no one, specific, perfect way to get where you want to get,” Thejus said.

It has been two months since Stitt signed his executive order and students are still waiting to hear how the order will be implemented at OU.

Many students agree that any restrictions on DEI will have drastic consequences — both now and in the future — for students and patients.

“Without DEI, it’s just honestly going to be a step backwards,” Franklin said. “It’s going to make it that much harder to change the issues within health care. It’s gonna make it harder than it already is.”

Q

How can I have the most memorable Spring Break yet?

A

Let's face it, not everyone will be spring breaking in Cancún.

However, we have some tips about how to have a memorable spring break no matter where you're at! Each year, more students are exploring alternative options that give them a chance to give back to their community or simply take care of themselves.

Whatever your plans are, **be sure to follow these tips** for a break you'll remember for years to come!



If you plan to drink, be sure to be safe:

- Use a cup cover
- get your own drinks,
- Avoid binge drinking.



Make sure you have clear consent before engaging in any sexual acts... Visit the OU Advocates website for sexual consent guidelines.



Stay with people you know. Traveling or going out is much safer when you're with friends you know and trust.



Keep your ID on you... You're likely to need it no matter where you travel.



Stay in your Zone (BAC of 0.03-0.05). Check out our Insta for ways to check your BAC.



Store your money safely and keep tabs on your spends. You don't want to end up stranded and broke!



NEVER drink and drive. Check out these local resources, use ride-sharing apps or call a friend or family member.



Remember, if it's against the law, it's not worth it, Don't jeopardize your greatest Spring Break or future by breaking the law!



Have fun, be safe, spend your break with people you love, and follow our tips and you're sure to have a Spring Break you will never forget! **Make lots of memories, Sooners!**

Happy Spring Break!



UNIVERSITY OUTREACH
SOUTHWEST PREVENTION CENTER
The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

This Red Cup Q&A is written by Charlene Shreder, MPS, ICPS, Chloe Sanders, LCSW, and Mackee Slattery, BSW from OU Southwest Prevention Center. Content provided by University of Arizona Health Promotion and Preventative Services department of the UA Campus Health Service. Red Cup Q&A is paid for by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.





The Oklahoma state Capitol in Oklahoma City.

ADEN CHOATE/OU DAILY

BURSTING THE PARTISAN BUBBLE

Lawmakers talk polarization, education and what comes next

BY TEEGAN SMITH • TEEGAN.D.SMITH-1@OU.EDU

With a contentious presidential election coming in the fall, increased tension surrounding international conflict and divisiveness among politicians, Norman's legislators face new challenges with deep partisanship and social media conflict heading into the second session of the 59th Legislature.

Kicking off the session, Gov. Kevin Stitt gave his sixth State of the State address, focusing on tax cuts, business, safety and education. His goal of making Oklahoma a top 10 state, he said, is only just beginning.

"In 2019, I addressed this body for the very first time," Stitt said during his address on Feb. 5. "And I laid out a vision to make Oklahoma top 10 in everything we do. I said, 'The Oklahoma turnaround starts right now.'"

Norman's state legislators, made up of three Democratic representatives, a

Democratic senator and a Republican senator, hope to make progress in a state with a Republican supermajority and little bipartisan collaboration.

Oklahoma's political landscape

Larry Ferguson served in the Oklahoma House of Representatives for 20 years. Ferguson came from a family of newspaper publishers in rural parts of the state, including Cleveland, Pawnee and Hominy.

While serving in Oklahoma politics, Ferguson, a Republican, watched as the state's Legislature was predominantly run by Democrats. The state's governor flipped from party to party throughout his time as a representative.

Oklahoma politics looks vastly different today, with the state's top officials leaning

increasingly more conservative and passing executive orders and laws coinciding with recent Republican ideology, partly influenced by the rhetoric of former President Donald J. Trump.

Stitt and his Republican counterparts in the Senate and House presented and passed one of the most restrictive abortion bans in the country, called for review and bans of diversity, equity and inclusion programming at universities and instituted conservative policies in schools.

Ferguson said Stitt has a "very one-sided attitude," but the Legislature is better about being bipartisan on most topics. However, Ferguson said the Legislature is facing leadership issues and that problems arise when leadership isn't getting input from the entire state.

"Your vote should represent the people that elected you, I don't know how much of that's going to happen when they get started," Ferguson said.

Norman's sole Republican delegate, Sen. Rob Standridge, said he hopes to see beneficial leadership changes in the Senate before his tenure is over, and one of the main areas he differs from his party's values is regarding corporate welfare.

He listed an example of the money Oklahoma planned to give to the electronics company Panasonic to build a battery plant in the state. Standridge said the last thing Panasonic needs is more money.

"The difference today is that the Republican Party is in total disarray. We have people running for Republican seats that aren't Republican," Standridge said.

Ferguson said the Legislature is ultimately a battle between legislators from Oklahoma City and Tulsa and those from smaller towns across the state. The problem is they either don't have leadership at all or they have too many leaders, Ferguson said.

"If your leadership doesn't have a good input throughout the state and they're not listening to people except those in their neighborhood, I think it creates a big problem," Ferguson said.

The majority of core and East Norman is split evenly between Republican and Democratic voters, demonstrating a tangible polarity in the values of Norman residents. In the past four years alone, Norman has experienced partisan divisiveness in its own city council. Homelessness, police funding and the effects of a global pandemic brought local politics to the forefront of Norman residents' minds.

Sen. Mary Boren (D-Norman) acknowledged Norman is a unique community compared to the rest of Oklahoma, and her district, which makes up core and East Norman, has different viewpoints and values that she strives to represent.

One of eight Democratic senators, Boren said she often struggles to find time to, first, be heard, and second, to agree with the 40 Republican senators.

"I kind of end up becoming a dissenting voice to a lot of things at the Capitol and I feel that's my primary responsibility in representing the people of Norman, ... to be adept at articulating that dissenting minority, even marginalized perspective on issues that impact Oklahoma," Boren said.

Standridge said the voters in his district, which encompasses the areas outside of OU and core Norman, know where he stands on policy and he has stayed the same in his values since he was first elected.

"Everybody in my district knows exactly

where I'm at," Standridge said. "There's some that disagree with me. I respect that and I do absolutely talk to and visit with every one of my constituents that want to talk to me and help them however I can."

In the wake of his interim study on DEI, Standridge said his number one issue is to codify the removal of those programs from Oklahoma's public universities. Standridge also said he is still working to protect children from obscene materials with legislation like Senate Bill 1056 from last session.

National political tensions are on the rise as well after the Oklahoma Republican Party approved a resolution to condemn and censure Sen. James Lankford (R-Okla.) for his bipartisan border bill negotiations.

The \$118 billion deal would have provided around \$20 billion for new migrant policies and immigrant restrictions on the southern border, while the rest of the money would be divided to provide humanitarian aid to Ukraine and Israel and support their war efforts along with other U.S. foreign interests.

Republican leaders in Congress condemned the bill and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said the bill wouldn't go anywhere, with many Republicans planning to vote against it during the procedural vote. Trump expressed complete opposition to the bill and demanded Republicans reject it, also claiming that he never endorsed Lankford for reelection in 2022. On Feb. 7, the Senate blocked the border bill from advancing.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.) said the backlash on the bill is a "new Republican line on the border," and that the goal posts for negotiations have moved because of this.

Increasing tensions in national politics could be attributed to the upcoming presidential election in November and Norman legislators discussed this as one of the reasons the country and the state are witnessing growing polarization.

Norman legislators cited social media as a factor contributing to political divisiveness. Legislators also acknowledged that Norman is a uniquely diverse community compared to the rest of the state.

Standridge said social media is extraordinarily divisive and blames it for the immature rhetoric in the U.S. at large.

"I put my policies there and people want to gripe at you or cuss at you. That's not the right way to do it," Standridge said.

Boren said the divisiveness caused by social media is lucrative. She cited how people engage more with toxicity on social media and that's how the platforms sell ads.

"We know that divisiveness in politics is an easy way to raise funds and even to get

elected or to keep power," Boren said. "It's an economic model that works within politics as well."

Rep. Annie Menz (D-Norman), who represents Ward 5 and the Lake Thunderbird area of Norman, said she believes social media exacerbates political divisiveness because people are expected to have knee-jerk reactions, while Boren acknowledged the barriers that social media breaks down.

"Social media is new and it has broken down natural geographic barriers that people may have felt safe to stay in their own corners of the world," Boren said. "People feel threatened when they can't control their bubble and social media can penetrate that bubble."

Rep. Jacob Rosecrants (D-Norman) said social media is a factor in the polarization of current politics. He said it's now harder than ever to distinguish the truth because of social media.

"It's on the voter to, unfortunately, have to dig through all this crap. That's why I think it's made such a negative effect on politics," Rosecrants said.

Rosecrants, a frequent poster on the social media platform X, formerly known as Twitter, said social media can help and hurt both everyday citizens and politicians.

"It's an excellent way to get your voice out there without spending hundreds of thousands of dollars," Rosecrants said.

The current legislative session is expected to feature heavy-hitting legislation and national talking points, given the looming presidential election. Many of the topics include mental health, policies aiming to better control the Oklahoma State Department of Education and immigration policies.

Looking forward

Norman legislators discussed concerns with State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters and leadership within the State Department of Education. Walters was elected in November 2022 and will be up for reelection in 2026.

Menz said one of the main topics this legislative session will deal with is crises in the state public education system, particularly actions taken by Walters.

Throughout Walters' term, controversies with his leadership have been prominent, including a partnership with a right-wing nonprofit online education program PragerU, mismanagement of teacher sign-on bonuses and the introduction of a program to raise teacher salaries without increasing state funding to school districts.

"A big topic is going to be public education and trying to not just mitigate the disaster that is Ryan Walters, but also trying to put pieces back together that he leaves in his wake,"

Menz said.

During the upcoming session, Rep. Jared Deck (D-Norman) is focused on accountability and wants to ensure the executive branch is held to the same standards as the Legislature, specifically the State Department of Education.

Deck cited the administration of the department as one of the main concerns of his district, which extends north of Highway 9 to Rock Creek Road at the district's northernmost point, including OU and core Norman. Recently, multiple teachers across the state who were incorrectly awarded bonuses received letters demanding they give the money back to the department before the end of February. Kristina Stadelman, a mother of five and a special education teacher in the Oklahoma City metro area, was one of these teachers and joined a lawsuit to challenge the demands.

"The State Department of Education did not do a thorough job in the application process and has now asked some of those teachers to pay that money back, which will literally bankrupt some families," Deck said.

Rosecrants, a former sixth grade social studies teacher, has been a representative since 2017, when he was inspired to run for office after becoming frustrated with Oklahoma's education system. At the time, Oklahoma was in a near decade-long streak of the most funding cuts to education but had success with new assessment policies and programs for immigrant students to graduate high school.

In light of recent events with Walters and the State Department of Education's misstep with teacher bonuses, Rosecrants said he views Walters and his rhetoric as a clear and present danger to Oklahoma public schools.

"Folks need to understand what is going on, and they need to see it in broad daylight rather than in the dark," Rosecrants said.

Ferguson said the misuse of school funding across the state is a large problem.

In June, a state audit found that about 20% of grant funds meant for educational purposes were misused.

Ferguson said the disorganization of where funds are going for private and public schools is a concern.

"We need to take care of where they're going," Ferguson said. "If we spend all the money on private schools, then they're starting to hurt public schools the majority of the students go to."

Deck said he believes mental health will also be a focal point in regard to funding and expanding services across Oklahoma this legislative session.

In September, the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse

Services announced the planned construction of a new mental health hospital in Oklahoma City to replace Griffin Memorial Hospital in Norman as the state's primary mental health facility. The new hospital will feature 330 beds and is predicted to serve 275 adults and 55 adolescents daily.

In 2023, Menz authored House Bill 2724 that would create the Oklahoma Housing Authority Act and reward landlords under certain criteria, but the bill didn't pass into law.

Menz said homelessness in Norman is a big concern she hears from constituents and is an issue spanning the U.S. The bill she advocated for would have provided a one-time bonus to landlords who keep Section 8 housing voucher tenants for a certain amount of time.

Section 8 housing is the primary federal program by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that helps low-income families and disabled and elderly individuals find safe, affordable housing.

She said this bill would have combated stigma by incentivizing landlords to accommodate individuals utilizing Section 8 housing, giving people more consistency and stability in their lives so they can get back on their feet.

"My bill specifically is angled toward landlords, incentivizing landlords to not only accept Section 8 housing vouchers, but to keep a good relationship with those tenants," Menz said.

As Menz's district includes Ward 5 and the Lake Thunderbird areas of Norman, her primary goal is to support and stand with those in her district who are fighting to keep their homes amid turnpike construction plans.

ACCESS Oklahoma is the Oklahoma Turnpike Authority's plan to relieve Interstate-35 congestion via construction of new routes over the next 15 years. The plans include highways through rural Norman directly west of Lake Thunderbird and through areas of Moore, Newcastle, Noble and Slaughterville.

"I want to stand up for the people in my district who are fighting for their homes to keep the turnpike from getting built," Menz said.

Boren said she expects to see more bills this session related to reproductive health care, such as bills aimed at preventing women from traveling out of state for reproductive care.

In 2022, over 2,100 pregnant Oklahomans traveled to Kansas or Colorado to receive abortion services. Boren said the anti-women health care rhetoric works for the current leadership in the state Capitol and mentioned the partisanship on the topic.

"It's a great moneymaker. It's a great way for them to keep power and it's a great way for them to justify defunding government ser-

vices," Boren said.

Boren thinks there will be a new trend over the next five to 20 years regarding the growing impact of tribal sovereignty, citing the tribes' success in lobbying to override several of the governor's vetoes. Last summer, the Oklahoma Legislature overrode Stitt's vetoes regarding tribal compacts on the sale of tobacco and motor vehicle licenses issued by tribes.

In Stitt's State of the State address, he compared the tribal governments of eastern Oklahoma to that of the Navajo reservation in Arizona. Stitt said the jurisdiction across the state is confusing and clarification of law enforcement relationships between the state and tribes is vital.

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. expressed disappointment in Stitt's rhetoric during the address and said the governor is treating the tribes as problems that need to be solved. In an X thread after the address, Hoskin said the governor continues to waste resources on legal battles due to lack of communication and collaboration between the state and the tribes.

According to a statement by Hoskin, a statewide poll in 2023 suggested 80% of Oklahomans agree tribes contribute to the well-being of the state, compared to 53% two decades ago.

"At the legislative level, the tribes have the political power to get a supermajority to advance tribal sovereignty," Boren said. "That has made the governor weaker."

Entering the second session of the 59th Legislature, Norman's legislators confront challenges arising from deep partisanship and social media conflict. Acknowledging the state's Republican supermajority, legislators grapple with limited bipartisan collaboration.

The impact of social media on political divisiveness is recognized by lawmakers, who observe its role in amplifying rhetoric and hindering bipartisan efforts. The legislative session unfolds against a backdrop of national tensions and will address issues such as education, housing, health care and tribal sovereignty.

Ferguson said the leadership of both parties in Oklahoma is misrepresenting the concerns and values of their constituencies. He said the current leadership assumes that everything going on in Oklahoma is fine, but it's not.

"I think elected people have lost some of their desire to stand up and take a position; they're there, and they show up, and they vote however the majority is voting," Ferguson said. "There hasn't been any big leadership that has stood out."

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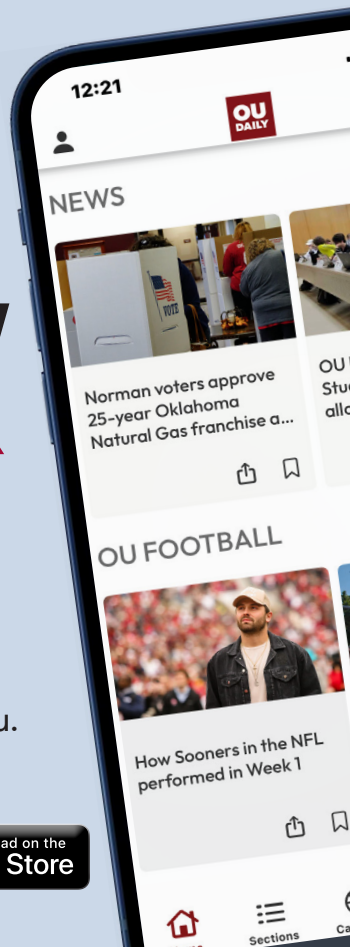
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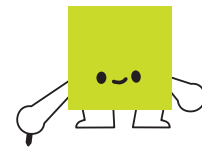
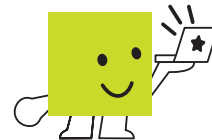
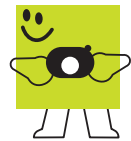
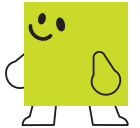
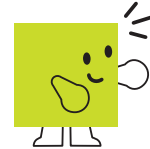
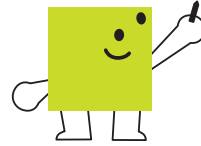
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JENNA BURRESS/OU DAILY

Surveyors during the Cleveland County annual point-in-time count at George M. Sutton Wilderness Park on Jan. 25.

HOMELESSNESS ON THE RISE

City leaders consider affordable housing, shelter options

BY TAYLOR JONES • TAYLOR.P.JONES-1@OU.EDU

Gathering supplies, Norman volunteers headed into rain-soaked streets to conduct Cleveland County's annual point-in-time count aiming to gather survey data on those experiencing homelessness.

Starting at 5:30 a.m. on Jan. 25, volunteers met with individuals experiencing homelessness to learn more about their age, gender and how long they've been without a home.

Point-in-time counts are used to identify gaps in services provided to people experiencing homelessness in cities across the U.S. and determine the amount of federal resources provided to the county.

Many Norman service providers have recognized an increase in the population of people experiencing homelessness since 2014 and said there are many misconceptions about homelessness, its causes and what can be done to help. Homelessness has been a recent topic of conversation in community Facebook

groups, city council meetings and more as the city grapples with how to address it and how best to serve the population and Norman at large.

Some residents blame people experiencing homelessness for rising crime rates. Some residents and council members want to address the issue through a new shelter, but to no avail.

These issues and the increased debate in Norman isn't caused by homelessness itself, according to April Doshier, executive director of Food and Shelter, a homelessness outreach organization. She said it is an issue of poverty, mental health and a lack of humanity and awareness.

"Homelessness is rising everywhere, literally everywhere," Doshier said. "Systems are being saturated. I mean, (at A Friend's House) we have 52 beds. They're full every single night. We're turning away dozens and dozens of

people who want to get inside. ... We're kind of at a crisis in this country, and it's not just a Norman crisis. It's an everywhere crisis."

The number of people experiencing homelessness has grown since 2022. According to a CBS news article, over 650,000 people nationally experienced homelessness on a single night in January 2023, a 12% rise from 2022. The article also stated that homelessness increased by nearly 11% among individuals, 7.4% among veterans and 15.5% among families with children in 2023.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness found that in Oklahoma there are 3,871 people homeless on a given night. The organization also found that homelessness and poverty are linked, given that when economic instability increases, so does the risk of homelessness.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 37.9 million Americans were living in poverty in 2022, accounting for 11.5% of the population.

"They're seniors, they're people with disabilities, they're single moms," Doshier said. "The rising cost of everything is not keeping up with the amount of money that people make."

Many of the reasons for homelessness, as recorded by the point-in-time count volunteers, were due to upticks in housing costs and mental illness. Other reasons included finances, substance use, domestic violence and lack of legal resources to deal with landlords.

Since 2014, the point-in-time counts found increases in those experiencing homelessness in the Norman and Oklahoma metropolitan area, according to Linn Blohm, executive director of Thunderbird Clubhouse, an organization that provides resources for adults living with mental illness.

"With the high cost of living, we just aren't sure what (the point-in-time count is) going to bring," Blohm said. "We know more people are out on the streets (and) more people are experiencing homelessness for the first time."

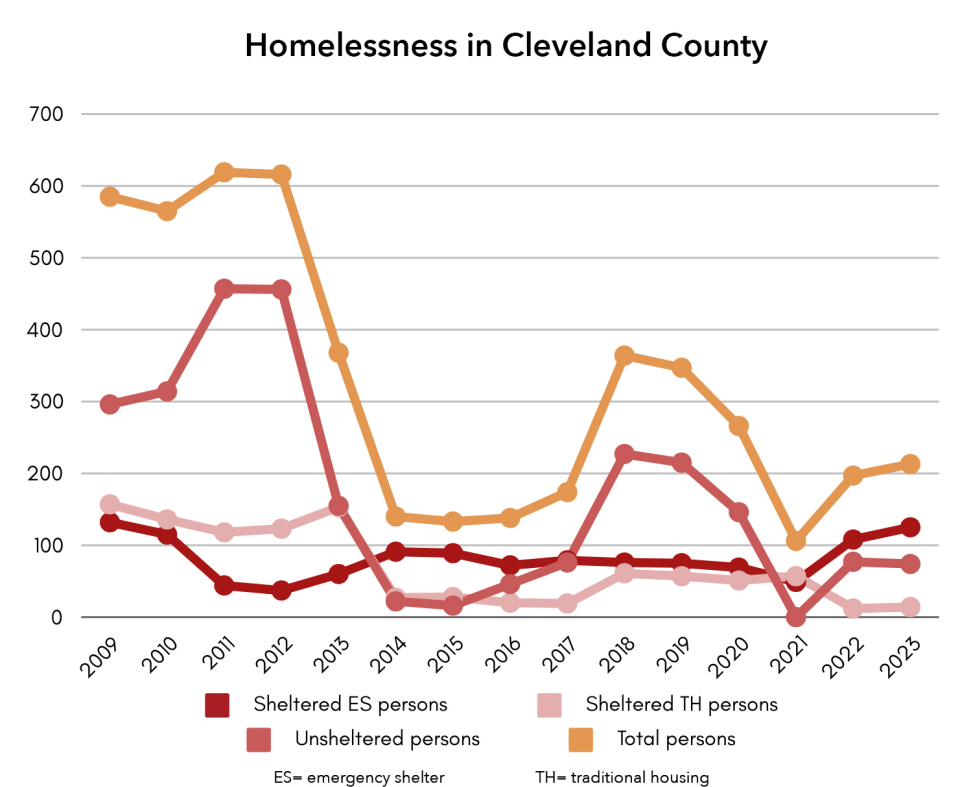
The cost of living in Norman has risen over the years, according to Blohm. Compared to Oklahoma City, Norman's cost of housing is approximately 38% higher, according to Forbes' cost of living calculator as of early February.

In Norman, the cost of buying and renting housing is 20% higher than the state average and 14% lower than the national average, according to RentCafe. The cost of utilities is 1% lower in Norman than Oklahoma's average, but food costs are 7% higher than the state average and 1% higher than the national average.

"Folks who are out on the streets and sleeping outside, they may not have the financial, mental or physical capability of doing better for themselves in that moment," Blohm said. "But they don't necessarily want to be outside. There's this element of some people thinking people want to be homeless or they use the system to stay homeless. Everybody that I talked to that's on the streets, they want a warm place to sleep, they want to be housed. They just have barriers and other things keeping them from being housed at this moment."

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development data from December indicates that the overall rise in homelessness, especially first-time homelessness, is due to sharp changes in the rental housing market and the loss of pandemic programs focused on preventing evictions and housing loss.

Kara Fritts, a recovery support specialist and outreach employee for the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, said many people believe that substance abuse is the number one cause of homelessness. However, homelessness



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is a combination of many different factors, a primary one being trauma.

Fritts said in her experience, trauma, traumatic brain injury and mental illness, which may then turn some to substance abuse, were the primary causes of chronic homelessness. Chronic homelessness is when a person experiences homelessness for at least a year while struggling with a disabling condition such as mental illness, substance abuse or a physical disability.

"Everybody, I think, has gone through something, of course, but the chronic homeless in our community that I personally have worked with have gone through a substantial amount of trauma and not all of them have chosen to use substance with them."

Fritts said there are many great mental health resources in Norman, including the Continuum of Care, numbers to call or text, Red Rock Behavioral Health Services and Griffin Memorial Hospital.

The Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services announced in September the construction of a behavioral health hospital on the Oklahoma State University-Oklahoma City campus, which will replace Griffin Memorial Hospital as the state's primary mental health hospital.

"There could always be a need for people to help and I don't think you need to be at an agency or have any type of even a title, ... especially within the community," Fritts said. "That's the most important part. There doesn't

need to be a separation between the unhoused and the housed. I mean, these people already are members of our community."

Food and Shelter is a nonprofit in Norman that provides meals and operates A Friend's House, an overnight shelter. A Friend's House opened a little over a year ago and has since provided over 500 people with at least one night of shelter, according to Doshier.

Doshier said the reason Food and Shelter opened A Friend's House was the need for more shelter for people experiencing homelessness in Norman.

She witnessed this need firsthand when she arrived at A Friend's House one cold day on her way to a lunch meeting and saw a group of people lined up at the door. When she asked why they were there, as the shelter didn't open until 5 p.m., one told her that all he could think about was if he didn't line up then, he would have to sleep outside.

"His sole focus while being homeless was, 'Where am I going to sleep at night?'" Doshier said. "That really jarred me, because I thought that there's just no way to get out of that situation if your sole focus is surviving night-to-night-to-night."

Ward 7 Councilmember Stephen Tyler Holman, who has served on city council for over a decade, said he has also noticed the rise in homeless populations over the years.

As a whole, Norman's population has grown by over 18,000 people over the past decade, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

In Cleveland County, the 2023 point-in-time count found that there were 213 total persons experiencing homelessness. Of that number, 30 were found to be experiencing chronic homelessness.

According to the 2023 point-in-time count data, the total number of unhoused persons and those seeking emergency shelter or traditional housing in Cleveland County increased in 2016 and following a dip, has been steadily rising since 2021. Blohm attributes the increases in homeless populations to an increase in housing costs.

Holman said rent in Norman is growing at an increasingly fast rate. The annual percentage increase since 2023 was 18% for a studio apartment, 1% for a one-bedroom apartment and 9% for a two-bedroom apartment, according to data from Rent as of January.

In September, the median rent for all bedrooms and property types in Norman was \$1,300, according to Zillow. The median rent for the 16 cities that will have universities in the SEC next year was \$1,621. In 12 of the cities, the median rent was more expensive than in Norman.

Norman residents can use Section 8 vouchers, an assistance program that provides rent subsidies, but many say the process leaves them to find a home with little help. The voucher grants 120 days to find a property, allowing for two 30-day extensions. If they fail to secure housing before the expiration of these extensions, Normanites have to restart the process.

According to Redfin, in December, the price of homes in Oklahoma were up 5.1% compared to last year.

"There's a good rush of sorts, of people coming in from out of Oklahoma and buying up real estate, then raising the rents," Holman said. "More and more Oklahomans, since wages have not risen in Oklahoma, are having a harder and harder time keeping the housing they have or finding new housing, if they lose the housing they have."

Doshier said there is a nationwide need to address the poverty crisis. In Norman, Doshier has noticed a push for more affordable housing, which she said would greatly benefit the city.

"Definitely, we have to address what it costs to live," Doshier said. "I think that the issue that people are so upset about when they go to city council meetings is having to see people sleeping outside with their shopping carts. And it's a distressful thing, whether you're somebody like me who sees it and says, 'This is a shame on our city that we allow people to sleep like this,' or you're somebody who says, 'This is bad for business.'"

Norman City Council has debated locations, funding and building of new shelters and affordable housing across

the city. However, no solution has been accepted and questions remain unanswered.

In April 2022, city council suggested moving the emergency homeless shelter into an abandoned Griffin Memorial Hospital building. Holman said residents resisted the move since it was too close to Le Monde International School, a public charter school in Norman.

In May 2022, the city of Norman announced that the emergency shelter on East Comanche Street would close on June 27 after the landlord decided not to renew the lease.

In January 2023, city council approved an affordable housing project and zoning efforts for a new student housing complex, The Verve, on Classen Boulevard near the Jimmie Austin Golf Club. This complex will be built where the OU Motel is currently located, which is commonly used as an affordable housing complex.

In May, city council discussed the next steps for the city in developing affordable housing at the intersection of Oakhurst Avenue and Imhoff Road, a project funded by the American Rescue Plan Act.

In August, the city planning commission did not recommend rezoning for A Friend's House, which would have relocated the shelter from 109 W. Gray St. to 718 N. Porter Ave. This was due to resident concerns that the move would harm businesses and reputation in the area.

In November, ONE Norman, a task force meant to help Norman develop a long-term comprehensive plan to improve infrastructure, quality of life and housing, formed a partnership with nonprofit CivicCon to address affordable housing, following results of Norman's quality of life survey.

"Every solution we (in city council) propose is met with a no and then there's no solution offered," Holman said. "It's like: 'We don't like what solutions you guys are coming up with. We don't have any solutions to offer, either. We just don't like what you guys are doing.' So it's extremely frustrating to deal with that type of attitude and misinformation and lack of humanity."

At recent city council meetings, several Norman residents have expressed frustration with the current state of homelessness in Norman and blamed recent crimes on those experiencing homelessness.

"My rights are being taken away. I no longer feel safe in Norman, in my neighborhood. I've given up running, I don't want to walk alone and I don't dare go to a park at all," Chelsey Gravel, a resident who frequently speaks at council meetings about the unhoused population in Norman, said during a council meeting on May 23.

Doshier said evidence does not support Norman residents' claims that homelessness leads to higher crime rates, and the real problem is an ongoing systematic issue.

Many residents are concerned that the Norman Police Department is understaffed and losing potential officers to other Oklahoma cities. These concerns are in light of the crime residents attribute to the homeless population.

In November, a Scratch Kitchen employee was stabbed outside of the restaurant in downtown Norman.

Following the incident, Scratch Kitchen's owner, Brady Sexton, wrote in a Facebook post that the suspect was a person experiencing homelessness. Sexton also wrote that he recognizes the efforts by organizations advocating for Norman's homeless population, but the burden shouldn't fall on them and instead should be the city council's responsibility.

According to NPD, the recent findings of crime related to Norman's homeless population from Jan. 1 to Aug. 10, 2023, showed that 70 people were arrested from Food and Shelter, while A Friend's Place saw 20 arrests. A Friend's Place therefore accounted for 0.61% of total arrests within the city.

NPD Major Jamie Shattuck said he has seen many of those experiencing homelessness suffer from a lack of mental health and substance abuse care.

According to 2022 national data, Oklahoma ranks 28th in access to mental health care, a ranking that considers insurance, access to treatment, quality and cost of insurance, access to special education and workforce availability.

Shattuck said he noticed an increase in calls about people experiencing homelessness over several years, although these are mostly regarding individuals simply being on the street.

"It's not a crime to be homeless," Shattuck said. "It's not uncommon to have your stuff on Main Street and walk down Main Street. We get calls on people like that from time to time, ... so the best thing that you can do is try to educate people."

Education about laws concerning a person's rights and what experiencing homelessness means within a city, Shattuck said, is what people need to have when it comes to understanding the issue and policing it.

"We're going to treat unhoused people exactly the same way as we would anybody else," Shattuck said. "We can't make exceptions there because everybody has inherent value. Right? Even people who are in a bad situation."

Doshier said the key to working toward solving the crisis of homelessness is to look past the negative stereotypes and to take into account how they got there and how certain life traumas may have redirected their lives.

"Every single person here, regardless of how they got here, were born a human being just like every one of us, and that's the thing I wish more people would talk about," Doshier said.



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