



Homelessness in the United States of America

Widespread homelessness didn't always exist; however, during the 1980s homelessness increased significantly. Now, on any given night, approximately 750,000 men, women, and children are homeless in the US.¹

A homeless person, as defined in the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence or their primary residence is one of the following:

- A temporary place for people about to be institutionalized;
- Any place not meant for regular sleeping accommodation by humans; or
- A supervised temporary shelter.

This definition also includes those people who are at risk of losing their housing because they are being evicted from their residence or they are being discharged from institutions, such as hospitals or prisons, and have nowhere else to go.

The major cause of homelessness in the US is the lack of affordable housing. This deficit is caused by a low supply of inexpensive housing and low incomes which prevent households from being able to afford housing. Housing is considered affordable when a household spends no more than 30 percent of its income on housing.² This growing scarcity of affordable housing, combined with the deinstitutionalization of our most vulnerable citizens and a growing gap between earnings and the cost of living, has left hundreds of thousands of individuals and families homeless.

In response, the federal government created a two billion-dollar homeless assistance system. This system met

Major Federal Programs that Address Homelessness

Section 8/ Public Housing. The Federal Government provides housing assistance to low-income families primarily through the Section 8 and public housing programs. The Section 8 program provides rental assistance for tenants who live in privately owned units, while public housing does the same for those living in units owned by the federal government. Tenants of both programs pay 30 percent of their income for housing, with the government making up the difference between that amount and the rent.

HUD Homeless Assistance Grants. Since the passage of the McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in 1987, the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds programs specifically targeted to address homelessness. HUD currently provides funds for permanent and supportive housing, shelters, transitional housing, and services.

Health Care for the Homeless. This is the only federally funded program specifically designed to meet the complex health care needs of people without homes. Health Care for the Homeless projects all over the country offer an integrated, community based approach to make sure people without homes receive the health care services they need.

the immediate food, shelter, and services needs of homeless people, but, after years of trying to make this system work, it became apparent that this system did not have the resources to end homelessness. Mainstream programs such as welfare, health care, housing assistance, and substance abuse treatment, the systems responsible for providing a safety net for poor people, were shifting the responsibility to the homeless assistance system.

Community Making Progress: Hennepin County

Through rapid rehousing, targeting resources, and an emphasis on prevention, Hennepin County Minnesota decreased family homelessness 43 percent, from 1,819 in 2002 to 1,046 families in 2004.⁴

Fact Checker: Statistics for Homeless Populations

Over the course of a year, between 2.5 and 3.5 million people will live either on the streets or in an emergency shelter.

Over 5 million low-income households have serious housing problems due to high housing costs, substandard housing conditions, or both.

Within 2-4 years of exiting foster care, 25 percent of foster children experience homelessness.

About 600,000 families and 1.35 million children experience homelessness in the US each year, and about 50 percent of the total homeless population is a part of a family.

It is estimated that between 23 and 40 percent of homeless adults are veterans.

Community Making Progress: San Francisco

Between 2002 and 2005, the number of chronically homeless individuals dropped from 8,640 to 6,248 (28%) because of San Francisco's Housing First approach.⁵

The rate of HIV infection in the homeless population is three times higher than that of the general population.

Homeless children go hungry twice as often as other children.

In rural areas, families, single mothers, and children make up the largest group of people who are homeless.

Only 20 percent of homeless families report they receive help finding housing.

43 percent of children living with homeless parents are under the age of 6.

Ending Homelessness is Possible

In 2000, the Alliance announced *A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*³ and since that time, hundreds of communities have created their own plans to end homelessness, and across the country, cities, counties, and states have taken action and created their own plans. These plans utilize key strategies espoused by the Alliance:

- **Create Data Systems.** Communities have developed homelessness management information systems that can be analyzed to assess how long people are homeless, what their needs are, what the causes of homelessness are, how people interact with mainstream systems of care, the effectiveness of interventions, and the number of homeless people.

Community Making Progress: New York City

In 2002, the city placed 22 percent of families who entered shelter in permanent housing; in 2003, 28 percent were placed; and by 2004, 33 percent were placed.⁶

- **Homelessness Prevention.** Communities have developed emergency homelessness prevention programs that include rent, mortgage, and utility assistance; case management; landlord or lender intervention; and other strategies to prevent eviction and homelessness. Communities also have mainstream programs that provide care and services to low-income people and consistently assess and respond to their housing needs. Ensuring that public institutions (hospitals, prisons, jails, and mental health facilities) are discharging people into housing is equally important.

Explore the Internet!

The internet is full of information on many topics, including homelessness. Go online and find a new fact about homelessness to share with your classmates.

You can find more information about homelessness on the Alliance's website:
www.endhomelessness.org

Want to know more?

Read and talk about one of these books:

No Place to Be: Voices of Homeless Children
by Judith Berck

Changing Places: A Kid's View of Shelter Living
by Judy Wallace, Glen Finland, Margie Chalofsky

Home Is Where We Live: Life at a Shelter Through a Young Girl's Eyes by Jane Hertensten

December by Eve Bunting

Rachel and Her Children: Homeless Families in America (Paperback) by Jonathan Kozol

The Visible Poor: Homelessness in the United States
by Joel Blau

Tell Them Who I Am: The Lives of Homeless Women
by Elliot Liebow

- **Outreach.** Communities have developed outreach and engagement systems designed to reduce barriers and encourage homeless people to enter appropriate housing linked with appropriate services.
- **Shortening Time of Homelessness.** Shelter and transitional housing systems in communities were organized to minimize the length of time people remain homeless, and the number of times they become homeless.
- **Links to Services.** Once households are re-housed, they have rapid access to services. Mainstream programs—Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, and others—provide the bulk of these services.

National Alliance to End Homelessness

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a leading voice on the issue of homelessness. The Alliance analyzes policy and develops pragmatic, cost-effective policy solutions. We work collaboratively with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to build state and local capacity, leading to stronger programs and policies that help homeless individuals and families make positive changes in their lives. We provide data and research to policymakers and elected officials in order to inform policy debates and educate the public and opinion leaders nationwide.

What You Can Do

Help people meet their daily needs. Think about the things that you do every day and the things you would not be able to live without. Homeless people need many of those same things and you can help them:

- Cook a meal and deliver it to an organization that serves food to people who do not have homes.
- Find out what a homeless program in your community needs most and collect money from your friends, neighbors, and family. Then buy and deliver those items to the program.
- Collect blankets, hats, and gloves for people who are living on the street and deliver these warm items to them.
- Treat homeless people the same way you would treat people who have a home and the same way you would want to be treated.

Teach other people about homelessness, its causes and how to solve it. After reading this fact sheet you are an expert on the ways to end homelessness. Share all of this information with your family and friends.

Write your national, state, and local government representatives who make the laws that affect homeless people. Tell your representatives what you have learned about homelessness and ask them what they plan to do to help these people.

¹ Cunningham, Mary and Meghan Henry. 2007. *Homelessness Counts*. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

² Cunningham, Mary and Sharon McDonald. 2006. *Promising Strategies to End Family Homelessness*. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

³ National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2001. *A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

⁴ National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2005. *Community Snapshot: Hennepin County*. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

⁵ National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2005. *Community Snapshot: San Francisco*. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

⁶ National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2005. *Community Snapshot: New York City*. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.