

Homelessness

What is homelessness? Homelessness describes the condition of people without a regular dwelling. People who are homeless are most often unable to acquire and maintain regular, safe, secure, and adequate housing, or lack "fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence." In 2004, the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, defined a homeless household as: those households without a shelter that would fall within the scope of living quarters. They carry their few possessions with them, sleeping in the streets, in doorways or on piers, or in another space, on a more or less random basis.

Homelessness is a big problem in the world today. An estimated 100 million people worldwide were homeless in 2005. In western countries, the large majority of homeless are men (75-80%), with single males particularly overrepresented. In the USA, LGBT people are over-represented among homeless youth, at 39%. Modern homelessness started as a result of economic stresses in society and reductions in the availability of affordable housing. In the United States, in the 1970s, the deinstitutionalization of patients from state psychiatric hospitals was a precipitating factor in urban areas. By the mid-1980s, there was also a dramatic increase in family homelessness. Tied into this was an increasing number of impoverished and runaway children, teenagers, and young adults, which created more street children or street youth.

The basic problem of homelessness is the need for personal shelter, warmth and safety. There are many other difficulties however which include: medical problems (reduced access to healthcare/dental services), personal security, quiet, and privacy (especially for sleeping), safekeeping of bedding, clothing and possessions, access to hygiene and sanitary facilities, cleaning and drying of clothes, obtaining, preparing and storing food in quantities, keeping contacts (without a permanent location or mailing address), hostility against urban vagrancy, limited access to education, increased risk of suffering from violence and abuse (when you do not have a safe home to go to), and a general rejection or discrimination from other people.

Some major reasons and causes for homelessness as documented by many reports and studies include; an unavailability of employment opportunities, poverty, lack of accessible healthcare (people who have some kind of chronic and weakening disease or disability are simply too weak to go and work every day), war or armed conflict, natural disasters, mental disorder (a United States Federal survey indicated that at least one-third of homeless men and women have serious psychiatric disorders), traumatic brain injury, social exclusion, (including because of sexual orientation and gender identity), substance abuse, lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, relationship breakdown, (particularly in relation to young people and their parents), and mortgage foreclosures (where mortgage holders see the best solution to a loan default is to take and sell the house to pay off the debt).

Most countries provide a variety of services to assist homeless people. They often provide food, shelter and clothing and may be organized and run by community organizations (often with the help of volunteers) or by government departments. These programs may be supported by government, charities, churches and individual donors.

While most homeless people do not have jobs, there is an increasing number of “working homeless”, or those who are employed but cannot afford a home. Homelessness has clawed its way tenaciously into the ranks of the employed, enveloping a growing number of families, couples and working people. In New York City for example, a study by the Vera Institute of Justice in 2005 found that “contrary to popular belief,” 79 percent of homeless heads of family had recent work histories and more than half had educational levels, up to college, that made them employable. There is an increasing number of people who work 2 or more jobs and still cannot afford housing. An increase in housing costs is partially to blame.

In the modern world, home construction became increasingly specialized and electric wiring and plumbing added to the cost of homes. Today, few people are capable of building their own homes, whereas once it was common practice. Specialization increases demand and price, which raises the cost of living. Building laws, codes, ordinances, and zoning limits can make home ownership even more expensive. In many places, houses without electricity and plumbing, or without foundations, that would once have been legal are now banned as substandard. The industrial revolution caused a great migration from the rural areas to urban areas. Urban areas often have more complex building codes to handle the denser populations in modern cities. City ordinances coupled with higher land prices make housing even more expensive in such urban areas. In New York City where the cost of living is very high, obtaining housing is nearly impossible for many.

Many homeless keep all their possessions with them because they have no access to storage. There was also the reality of the “bag” people, the shopping cart people, and the soda can collectors (known as bidders or dumpster divers) who sort through garbage to find items to sell, trade and eat. These people carry around all of their possessions with them all the time because they have no place to store them. If they had no access to or capability to get to a shelter and possible bathing, or access to toilets and laundry facilities, their hygiene was lacking. This again creates social tensions in public places.

Many homeless people who do not work make a living by begging or panhandling, which is the act of asking strangers for money in a public space, usually in high traffic areas such as outside of businesses or at traffic red lights. This sort of begging can be very lucrative, and many of the people who do it are not actually homeless. There have been some studies showing panhandlers can make upwards of \$80,000 a year. Increasingly panhandling is becoming illegal in many cities, which limits the options for those who actually need to do it.

More and more cities in the United States are enacting anti-homelessness legislation aimed at reducing the number of homeless on the public streets. These laws act by criminalizing much of the behavior homeless people engage in. Some examples include restricting the public areas in which sitting or sleeping are allowed, removing homeless from selected areas, and also prohibiting begging. Since the homeless are a particularly vulnerable group of people, these laws are seen by many to be abuse of the citizenry. In many areas benches and bus-stops are being designed so that nobody can sleep in or on them.

Modern homelessness started as a result of economic stresses in society and reductions in the availability of affordable housing such as single room occupancies (SROs) for poorer people. In the United States, in the 1970s, the deinstitutionalization of patients from state psychiatric hospitals was a precipitating factor that seeded the homeless population, especially in large cities like New York City. The Lanterman–Petris–Short Act greatly exacerbated homelessness among the mentally ill. This law lowered the standards for involuntary commitment in civil courtrooms and was followed by significant de-funding of 1700 hospitals caring for mental patients. The Community Mental Health Act of 1963 also helped set the stage for homelessness in the United States. Long term psychiatric patients were released from state hospitals into SROs and were supposed to be sent to community mental health centers for treatment and follow-up, but that never happened. A large portion of the homeless suffer from some sort of severe mental condition for which they need help.

By the mid-1980s, there was a dramatic increase in family homelessness. Tied into this was an increasing number of impoverished and runaway children, teenagers, and young adults, which created a new sub-stratum of the homeless population (street children or street youth). In 1987, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was enacted. The Act is a United States federal law that provides federal money for homeless shelter programs. It was the first significant federal legislative response to homelessness

In 2002, research showed that while the number of homeless people has not changed dramatically, children and families were the largest growing segment of the homeless population in the United States. Homelessness has migrated toward rural and suburban areas.

In the USA, the government asked many major cities to come up with a ten-year plan to end homelessness. One of the results of this was a "Housing first" solution, rather than to have a homeless person remain in an emergency homeless shelter it was thought to be better to quickly get the person permanent housing of some sort and the necessary support services to sustain a new home. Recently the Central Florida Commission on Homelessness released a study that found that it is three times as expensive to leave homeless people on the street as it is to house them and provide job training and health care. Currently, the taxpayers of Florida pay \$31,065 a year per chronically homeless person, The price tag covers the salaries of law-

enforcement officers to arrest and transport homeless individuals — largely for nonviolent offenses such as trespassing, public intoxication or sleeping in parks — as well as the cost of jail stays, emergency-room visits and hospitalization for medical and psychiatric issues.

The same study found that it would cost just \$10,050 a year to “take care” of them. According to Amnesty International USA, vacant houses outnumber homeless people by five times.

In eight years, Utah has quietly reduced homelessness by 78 percent, and is on track to end homelessness by 2015. Utah is solving homelessness by trying the radical idea of giving people homes. In 2005, Utah figured out that the annual cost of E.R. visits and jail stays for homeless people was about \$16,670 per person, compared to \$11,000 to provide each homeless person with an apartment and a social worker. So, the state began giving away apartments, with no strings attached.