

NATIONAL LAW CENTER ON HOMELESSNESS & POVERTY

Homelessness in America: Overview of Data and Causes

The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty currently estimates that each year at least 2.5 to 3.5 million Americans sleep in shelters, transitional housing, and public places not meant for human habitation. At least an additional 7.4 million have lost their own homes and are doubled-up with others due to economic necessity.

But data related to homelessness are far from exact. Part of the difficulty is that there are different definitions of homelessness now in use. For example, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban development (HUD) uses a narrow definition largely limited to people living in shelters, in transitional housing and in public places.¹ The U.S. Department of Education (DoE) uses a broader definition that includes families who are doubled-up with others due to economic necessity. Another difficulty concerns methodology. HUD reports annual “Point-in-Time” counts of the “unsheltered” homeless population; however, the methodology used to collect those numbers varies by community and is often deeply flawed.² HUD also reports annual counts of the sheltered population; this number varies with shelter capacity, which depends on variables such as available funding.³

The numbers and percentages below derive from different sources; many are from the HUD counts and thus must be viewed with caution. Others are based on DoE data, and reflect the more expansive definition; these also are likely undercounts since not all homeless children are counted. The numbers thus may not be consistent.

Overall population

- Before the 2008 recession, an estimated 2.5 to 3 million men, women, and children were experiencing homelessness each year (using the HUD definition), including a total of 1.35 million children, and over a million people working full or part-time but unable to pay for housing.⁴ Since then, indications are that the crisis has deepened:
 - The number of people who have lost their homes and are living doubled-up with family or friends due to economic necessity remained at 7.4 million people in 2012 (the last year for which data is available), consistent with 2011, but some states saw as much as an 80% increase.⁵
 - Over 1.2 million school children were homeless (using the DoE definition) during the 2012-2013 school year, an 8% increase over the previous school year.⁶ Almost 2.5 million children overall were homeless in 2013, an 8% increase over 2012.⁷
 - A 2014 survey in the Law Center’s report, *Welcome Home: The Rise of Tent Cities in the United States*, showed media reports of tent cities in 46 states across the country.⁸
 - According to a June 2014 report by the Joint Center for Housing Studies at Harvard University, there is now a crisis in affordable rental housing.⁹ In 2012, more than one out of every four renters (27%) paid over 50% of their income in rent.¹⁰ The number of cost burdened renters has increased each year since 2007.¹¹
 - According to the same report, racial and ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected.¹² In 2012, 27% of African-American households paid over 50% of their incomes in rent, along with 24% of Hispanic households and 21% of Asian households; only 14% of White households paid over 50% of their incomes in rent.¹³

- The safety net has failed to provide adequate resources. Only one in four of those poor enough to qualify for low-income housing assistance receives it.¹⁴

Demographics

- According to data collected by HUD, over the course of 2012 the “sheltered” homeless population was:
 - 63% male; 37% female¹⁵ (data based on sheltered adults)
 - 83.7% non-Hispanic/non-Latino; 16.3% Hispanic/Latino¹⁶
 - 38.9% White, non-Hispanic; 9.5% White, Hispanic; 39.4% Black or African American; 5% other single race; 7.2% multiple races¹⁷
 - 22.6% under age 18; 23.5% 18 to 30; 35.0% 31 to 50; 15.6% 51-61; 3.2% 62 and older¹⁸
 - 63.1% single-person household¹⁹
 - 38.6% disabled²⁰ (data based on sheltered adults)
- When compared to the total population and those living in poverty, those who are homeless are more likely to be adult, male, African American, not elderly, unaccompanied/alone, and disabled.²¹
 - In 2010, one out of every 141 persons in Black families stayed in a homeless shelter, compared with one out of every 990 persons in White families.²²
 - Black persons in families represented 38.8% of sheltered persons in families in 2010, though they only made up 12.1% of the entire U.S. family population.²³

Children, youth, and families

- People in families made up 37.4% of the total sheltered and unsheltered homeless population in 2012.²⁴
- The proportion of homeless people who used emergency shelters and transitional housing as part of a family increased from 30% to 35% from 2007 to 2010, with the majority of homeless families consisting of single mothers with young children.²⁵
- About 2.5 million children, or one in every 30, were homeless in 2013, an increase of 64% since 2007.²⁶
- From 2011 to 2012, the number of unaccompanied children in shelter increased by 28%.²⁷
- For the 2012-2013 school year, 1,258,182 students were identified as homeless, an increase of 7.6% over the previous year.²⁸ Of those students identified as homeless, 75% were living “doubled-up” with family/friends; 16% were living in shelters; 6% were living in hotels/motels; and 3% were living in some type of unsheltered location.²⁹

Veterans

- On a single night in January 2014, veterans accounted for about 11.3% of all homeless adults.³⁰
- During a 12 month period from October 2011 to September 2012, homeless veterans accounted for one in 156 veterans.³¹

Domestic violence survivors

- In a 2014 survey of 25 US cities, 15% of all homeless adults were identified as survivors of domestic violence.³²
- In a national census of domestic violence services conducted in September 2013, 36,348 victims of domestic violence received housing services from domestic violence programs, which includes emergency shelters and transitional housing, in a 24-hour period.³³

- The same domestic violence services census found that 60% of requests that service providers were not able to meet were those for housing (emergency shelter and transitional housing), with a total of 5,778 requests unmet.³⁴

Causes of homelessness

- Insufficient income and lack of affordable housing are the leading causes of homelessness:
 - In 2012, 10.3 million renters (approximately one in four) had “extremely low incomes” (ELI) as classified by HUD.³⁵ In that same year, there were only 5.8 million rental units affordable to the more than 10 million people identified as ELI.³⁶
 - Additionally, only 31 out of every 100 of these affordable units were actually available to people identified as ELI.³⁷
- After paying their rent and utilities, 75% of ELI households end up with less than half of their income left to pay for necessities such as food, medicine, transportation, or childcare.³⁸
- The foreclosure crisis also played, and continues to play, a significant role in homelessness:
 - In 2008, state and local homeless groups reported a 61% rise in homelessness since the foreclosure crisis began.³⁹
 - Approximately 40% of families facing eviction due to foreclosure are renters; the problem may continue to worsen as renters represent a rising segment of the U.S. population.⁴⁰
- For women in particular, domestic violence is a leading cause of homelessness.⁴¹
- According to the most recent annual survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors, major cities across the country report that top causes of homelessness among families were: (1) lack of affordable housing, (2) unemployment, (3) poverty, and (4) low wages, in that order.⁴² The same report found that the top four causes of homelessness among unaccompanied individuals were (1) lack of affordable housing, (2) unemployment, (3) poverty, (4) mental illness and the lack of needed services, and (5) substance abuse and the lack of needed services.⁴³

¹ The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, 42 U.S.C. §§ 11302(a)-(b) (2012). With the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act in 2009 as the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act, the HUD definition of “homeless” was expanded to include an individual who is exiting an institution where he or she temporarily resided; an individual or family who is at the imminent risk of losing their housing and has no resources to secure new permanent housing; unaccompanied youth and homeless families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under other federal statutes; and an individual or family who is experiencing domestic violence and other dangerous or life-threatening conditions such as dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking, etc. However, HUD uses the older, narrower definition in its counts. The narrow definition is sometimes referred to as “literal” homelessness. See U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, THE 2014 ANNUAL HOMELESS ASSESSMENT REPORT TO CONGRESS, PART 1 POINT-IN-TIME ESTIMATES OF HOMELESSNESS 2 (Oct. 2014), <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2014-AHAR-Part1.pdf>.

² Maria Foscarinis. *Homeless problem bigger than our leaders think: Column*, USA Today, Jan. 16, 2014, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2014/01/16/homeless-problem-obama-america-recession-column/4539917/>; Kim Hopper et al., Estimating Numbers of Unsheltered Homeless People Through Plant-Capture and Post count Survey Methods, *98 Am. J. Pub. Health* 1438, 1442 (2008), <http://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/abs/10.2105/AJPH.2005.083600>.

³ The most comprehensive and reliable data are from a survey conducted in 1996 by Martha Burt [Laudan Y. Aron, Edgar Lee, and Jesse Valente] and published in 2001 by the Urban Institute, [Martha R. Burt et al., *Helping America’s Homeless: Emergency Shelter Or Affordable Housing?* 47-50, The Urban Institute Press (2001). This study found that, using a narrow definition of homelessness, about 1 million were homeless at any given point in time and about 3.5 million were homeless over the course of a year. Unfortunately, it has not been updated since then.

⁴ See National Alliance to End Homelessness, HOMELESSNESS LOOMS AS POTENTIAL OUTCOME OF RECESSION (2009), http://www.endhomelessness.org/page/-/files/2161_file_Projected_Increases_in_Homelessness.pdf.

⁵ National Alliance to End Homelessness, THE STATE OF HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA 2014, 41 (2014), http://b3cdn.net/naeh/d1b106237807ab260f_qam6ydz02.pdf.

⁶ National Center for Homeless Education, EDUCATION FOR HOMELESS CHILDREN AND YOUTHS: CONSOLIDATED STATE PERFORMANCE REPORT DATA 2 (2014), <http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/data-comp-1011-1213.pdf>.

⁷ The National Center on Family Homelessness, AMERICA’S YOUNGEST OUTCASTS: A REPORT CARD ON CHILD HOMELESSNESS 6 (Nov. 2014), <http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/mediadocs/280.pdf>.

⁸ National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty & Yale University Law School Allard K. Lowenstein Human Rights Clinic, WELCOME HOME: THE RISE OF TENT CITIES IN THE UNITED STATES (2013),

http://nlchp.org/documents/WelcomeHome_TentCities.

⁹ See Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University, *THE STATE OF THE NATION'S HOUSING 22-26* (2014), http://www.jchs.harvard.edu/sites/jchs.harvard.edu/files/sonhr14_txt_bw-full.pdf.

¹⁰ *Id.* at 27.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.* at 27, 28.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 30.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *THE 2012 ANNUAL HOMELESS ASSESSMENT REPORT (AHAR) TO CONGRESS VOLUME II: ESTIMATES OF HOMELESSNESS IN THE UNITED STATES 1-8* (Sept. 2013), <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2012-AHAR-Volume-2.pdf>.

¹⁶ *Id.* at 1-9.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* at 1-8.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 1-11.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ U.S. States Conference of Mayors, *Hunger and Homelessness Survey: A STATUS ON HUNGER AND HOMELESS IN AMERICA'S CITIES – A 25-CITY SURVEY 2* (Dec. 2014), <http://www.usmayors.org/pressreleases/uploads/2014/1211-report-hh.pdf>.

²² Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, *INTERGENERATIONAL DISPARITIES EXPERIENCED BY HOMELESS BLACK FAMILIES 1* (Mar. 2012), http://www.icphusa.org/filelibrary/ICPH_Homeless%20Black%20Families.pdf.

²³ Ralph da Costa Nunez, *Homelessness: It's About Race, Not Just Poverty*, Citylimits.org, Mar. 2012, <http://www.citylimits.org/conversations/159/homeless-the-role-of-race>.

²⁴ U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, *THE 2014 ANNUAL HOMELESS ASSESSMENT REPORT (AHAR) TO CONGRESS, PART 1 POINT-IN-TIME ESTIMATES OF HOMELESSNESS 1* (Oct. 2014), <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2014-AHAR-Part1.pdf>.

²⁵ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, *The 2010 ANNUAL HOMELESS ASSESSMENT REPORT (AHAR) TO CONGRESS iii* (2010), <http://www.hudhre.info/documents/2010HomelessAssessmentReport.pdf>.

²⁶ See FN 7 at 15.

²⁷ See FN 15 at 2-8.

²⁸ See FN 6 at 1.

²⁹ *Id.* at 2.

³⁰ See FN 24 at 40.

³¹ See FN 15 at 4-6, 4-7.

³² See FN 21 at 2.

³³ National Network to End Domestic Violence, *DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COUNTS 2013: A 24-HOUR CENSUS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SHELTERS AND SERVICES 1* (Sept. 2013),

http://nnev.org/downloads/Census/DVCounts2013/Census13_FullReport_forweb_smallestFileSizeWhiteMargins.pdf.

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ National Low Income Housing Coalition, *HOUSING SPOTLIGHT: THE AFFORDABLE RENTAL HOUSING GAP PERSIST 2* (Aug. 2014), http://nlihc.org/sites/default/files/HS_4-1.pdf.

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.* at 3, 4.

³⁸ *Id.* at 4.

³⁹ National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, *STAYING HOME: THE RIGHTS OF RENTERS LIVING IN FORECLOSED PROPERTIES 2* (June 2010), <http://nlchp.org/documents/StayingHome>.

⁴⁰ National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, *EVICION (WITHOUT) NOTICE: RENTERS AND THE FORECLOSURE CRISIS 6* (Dec. 2012), http://www.nlchp.org/Eviction_Without_Notice.

⁴¹ Tischler, et al., *Mothers experiencing homelessness: mental health, support and social care needs*, 15 *Health Soc. Care Cmty.* 3, 246-253 (May 2007); see also Ellen Shelton, et al., *Homeless Study Fact Sheet: Long-Term Homelessness*, Wilder Res. Ctr. (Apr. 2013) (finding that at least 32% of homeless Minnesota women reported becoming homeless due to domestic violence).

⁴² See FN 21 at 2.

⁴³ *Id.*