

# Who is homeless?

NATIONAL  
HEALTH CARE  
*for the*  
HOMELESS  
COUNCIL

Who is homelessness?

This segment provides the basic demographics of homelessness in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

## The Definition of Homelessness (1)

- The term “homeless individual” means an individual who lacks housing (without regard to whether the individual is a member of a family), including an individual whose primary residence during the night is a supervised public or private facility that provides temporary living accommodations and an individual who is a resident in transitional housing.
- *Public Service Health Act, Section 330(h)(5)(A)*

Various programs or studies use differing formal definitions of homelessness. For federally-funded Health Care for the Homeless programs, the Congress has provided the following definition: ‘The term “homeless individual” means an individual who lacks housing (without regard to whether the individual is a member of a family), including an individual whose primary residence during the night is a supervised public or private facility that provides temporary living accommodations and an individual who is a resident in transitional housing.’

## The Definition of Homelessness (2)

- A homeless person is an individual without permanent housing who may live on the streets\ stay in a shelter, mission, single room occupancy facilities, abandoned building or vehicle\ or in any other unstable or non-permanent situation. A recognition of the instability of an individual's living arrangements is critical to the definition of homelessness.

*Bureau of Primary Health Care, HCH Principles of Practice, Program Assistance Letter 99-12*

In implementing this law, the Health Resources and Services Administration of the US Department of Health and Human Services has clearly understood the effect of substandard and unstable housing on one's health. "A homeless person is an individual without permanent housing who may live on the streets, stay in a shelter, mission, single room occupancy facilities, abandoned building or vehicle, or in any other unstable or non-permanent situation. A recognition of the instability of an individual's living arrangements is critical to the definition of homelessness."

## Who is homeless?



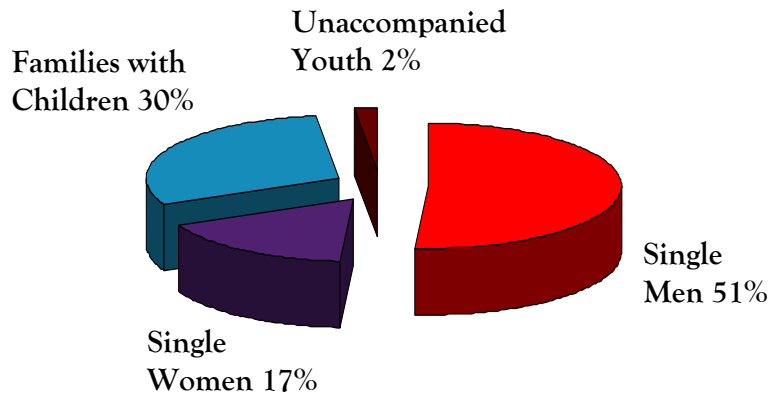
Photo by Alan Pickett

More than 760,000 people sleep on the streets or in shelters every night in U.S.

45% of them are on the streets, in cars, in abandoned buildings, or other places not meant for human habitation.

Homeless persons sometimes do not want to be identified as such, or do not even consider themselves homeless, so it is very difficult to get accurate figures on homelessness, but it is clear that many experience homelessness. One estimate of the population has over three quarters of a million people homeless in America each night, and several million over the course of a year. Almost half of them are not even in shelters.

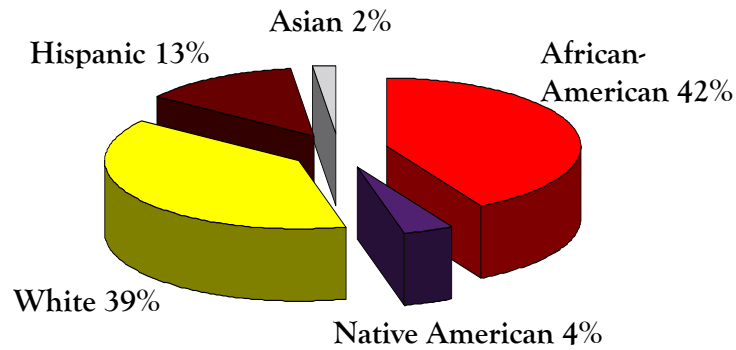
## Who is homeless?



*The US Conference of Mayors 23-City Survey: Hunger and Homelessness, December 2006*

Most homeless people are alone, without the strong support systems that make residential stability possible for most Americans. An estimated 51% are single men, 17% are single women, and 2% are unaccompanied youth. Families with children make up nearly a third of homeless people.

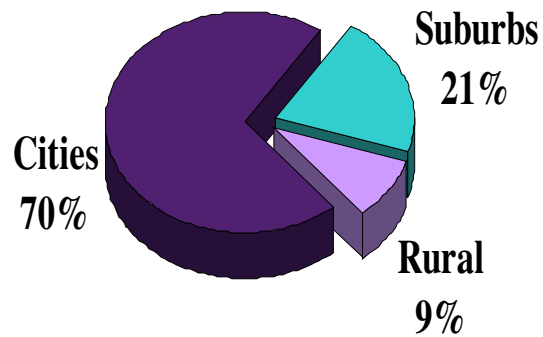
## Who is homeless?



*The US Conference of Mayors 23-City Survey: Hunger and Homelessness, December 2006*

In terms of race and ethnicity, people of color are vastly overrepresented among people experiencing homelessness, with African-Americans and Whites each representing about 40%, while many Hispanics, Native Americans and Asians are also homeless. The racial; and ethnic profile of homelessness varies from place to place.

## Where do we find people who are homeless?



*National Coalition for the Homeless, July 2007 & June 2008*

Homelessness is not just an urban phenomenon. For the significant homeless populations in suburban and rural areas, there are even fewer shelters and other resources than in the cities, and many homeless persons sleep in a car or camper, or with relatives in overcrowded or substandard housing.

## Families with Children

- Families with children are among fastest growing segments of people without housing -- 2% of all children in the US are homeless at any time
- In 2005, 32% of requests for shelter by homeless families were denied due to lack of resources



Photo by Sharon Morrison

*National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet # 2,  
Urban Institute, 2000*

Families with children are said to be the fastest growing segment of people without housing, particularly in times of economic difficulty. In 2005, 32% of requests for shelter by homeless families were denied due to lack of shelter capacity, and many homeless families double up in the homes of others, making them a “hidden homeless” population.



# Homeless Youth

50% use alcohol

50% have survival sex

35% use intravenous  
drugs



Photo courtesy of Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth

Noell J et al, 2001; Ringwalt et al ,1998; Farrow et al, 1992

Many factors make it hard to know exactly how many youth are homeless every year, but the number could be as high as 1.7 million each year. One study estimates that 15 percent of youth will become homeless at least once before age 18 . As with homeless adults, alcohol and drug use is common, and many homeless youth prostitute themselves sexually in return for income, alcohol and drugs, or temporary shelter.

## Age and Mortality

- Almost 80% are between ages 20–64
- Average life expectancy is 42-52 years

Still, most homeless people are adults. Due to harsh living conditions and often untreated chronic medical problems, their life expectancy is short, compared to almost 80 years for most Americans.

## Is all homelessness the same?



Photo by Sharon Morrison

Within this large and diverse population, old stereotypes of homelessness do not hold true. Homelessness is experienced differently by different people, and homeless people are NOT all the same. The Institute of Medicine has classified homelessness into three categories: temporary, episodic, and chronic.

# Temporary Homelessness



Photo courtesy of USDA NRCS



Photo by Lee Celano, NY Times

Many people are homeless only temporarily, when they are displaced from their homes by disasters ranging from fires to evictions. If a family or individual does not have a support system on which to depend, such a crisis may result in homelessness. Unfortunately, once people become even temporarily homeless, it is much more difficult for them to reintegrate into the community, especially if the loss of their home is compounded by other problems such as loss of tools, cars, employment, family breakup, reactive depression or substance abuse. (M-A 23)

## Episodic Homelessness



Photo by Shane Bauer



Photo by Shane Bauer



People who go in and out of homelessness are considered episodically homeless. For example, [dissolve in top right photo] someone who depends on monthly disability checks or other cash assistance may have housing only for a portion of each month. [dissolve in left photo] People who are chronically mentally ill may have trouble with their family and end up on the street periodically. This is also common with runaway and throwaway youths. Single mothers with young children may be able to find housing with relatives or friends during times of crisis, but experience episodes of homelessness in between. When people [dissolve in bottom right photo] are in this 'doubled-up' situation, they are often referred to as the 'hidden homeless.'

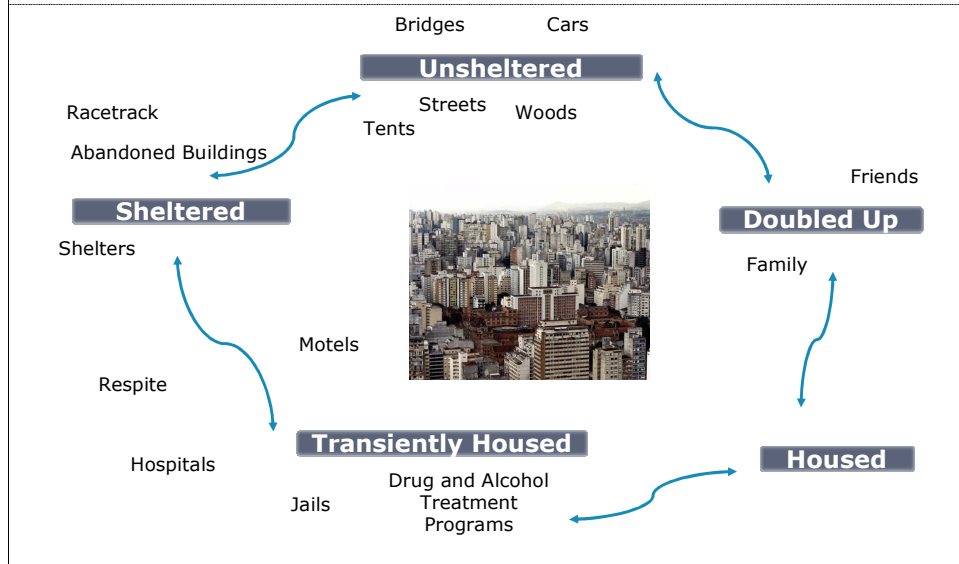
## Chronic Homelessness



Photo by Alan Pickett

People who are chronically homeless tend to be those suffering from mental illness or substance abuse problems. A person who spends more than a year on the street without any periods of housing during that time is usually considered chronically homeless. Less than one-third of people who are homeless at any point in time could be considered chronically homeless.

# Living Environments



This graphic shows another way of thinking about the different ways people live without housing. People may double-up with family or friends for awhile. They may be housed temporarily in hospitals, jails, treatment programs, motels, or medical respite programs, which we'll talk about more in Module Four. They may live in sheltered places out of the elements, in abandoned buildings or fairgrounds, or in actual shelters for people without homes. But they also may be living without shelter at all, in cars, under bridges, in the woods, on riverbanks, or on streets. Just as there are many different types of housing, there are also many types of homelessness. In Video 2.1, several people will talk about their personal experience with homelessness.