

2:2 What Causes Homelessness?

NATIONAL
HEALTH CARE
for the
HOMELESS
COUNCIL

In this section. We'll look at how poverty, the lack of affordable housing, and particular vulnerabilities often lead to homelessness.



**The Breadline, a sculpture by George Segal.
Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial. Washington D.C. USA**

Homelessness has occurred throughout human history, but in modern times mass homelessness like that seen in the Great Depression and again beginning in the 1980's, has been closely associated with major economic disruptions and extensive poverty.

Poverty

Single Individual

Under 65 years \$ 10,787

65 years & older \$ 9,944

Single Parent

One child \$ 14,291

Two children \$ 16,705

Two Adults

No children \$ 13,884

One child \$ 16,689

Two children \$ 21,027

Three children \$ 24,744



BHCHP nurse Trish Bowe offering care to a backstretch worker outside the stables at Suffolk Downs Racetrack in Boston. Photo by Stan Grossfield

<http://www.npc.umich.edu/poverty/>

The federal government considers people to be living in poverty if their annual incomes fall below the amounts shown here for 2007. Many people say these amounts are unrealistically low, given the actual costs of living. Still, in 2007 12.5 percent of all Americans, or 37 million people, had incomes lower than these, and were officially poor.

Paying the Rent

Federal Minimum Wage
\$7.25/hour

Average Renter Wage
\$14.69/hour



2 Bedroom Unit



\$17.84 per hour

Source: Out of Reach 2009, National Low Income Housing Coalition

In the US, a third of all households are renters, not homeowners. In our market economy, being able to afford the rent means the difference between staying housed and homelessness.

As of July 2009, the federal minimum wage is \$7.25 per hour. The average rental wage in 2009 is \$14.69. A renter household needs one full-time job paying \$17.84 per hour in order for a two-bedroom rental unit at the Fair Market Rent to be affordable.

For millions of our employed neighbors, housing is simply not affordable.

Housing Affordability Crisis

1980



Today

The housing affordability crisis is a function of both insufficient incomes and insufficient incentives for investors to build and operate low income housing.

Since 1980, the budget of the US Department of Housing and Urban Development has been reduced by more than half. These cuts have been a major contributor to a decline in the supply of low income rental housing, and the emergence of mass homelessness.

Source: Western Regional Advocacy Project (WRAP) 2007.

Poverty – unexpected emergency



Photo courtesy of Kent State University

It is easy to see why people in poverty don't have available money for emergencies such as flood, tornado or unexpected setbacks.

Poverty: Shelter Requests

- **280,000** people were unsheltered on a single night in 2007.
- Requests for emergency shelter increased by **9%**



Photo by James O'Connell, MD

Even emergency shelter is insufficient: approximately 280,000 people were unsheltered on a single night in 2007.

In 2007 alone, requests for emergency shelter were up 9%

Vulnerability



Photo by Sharon Morrison



Photo by David Comb



Photo courtesy of StreetSpirit.org

In this extremely tight housing market, those who are squeezed out tend to be individuals with the greatest personal problems and the weakest support systems.

You have learned in the PREVIOUS module about how street homelessness often follows an eviction and temporary stays with relatives or friends. People with chronic health problems are particularly vulnerable to following this path into homelessness, especially if addictions or mental illnesses impair their abilities to deal effectively with their landlords, friends and relatives.

Half of all personal bankruptcies are attributable to health care costs.

Because people become ill or injured and cannot pay for their care, they lose their financial standing and eventually their homes.



The NEW ENGLAND
JOURNAL of MEDICINE

The same pattern holds even for people of relatively greater means. A recent study in the New England Journal of Medicine shows that half of all personal bankruptcies are attributable to health care costs. So because people become ill or injured and cannot pay for their care, they lose their financial standing and eventually their homes.

Mental Illness

It is estimated that **25** percent of homeless people have at some time experienced severe mental illness such as schizophrenia or a major mood disorder.



P. Koegel, M.A. Burnam and J. Baumohl. The Causes of Homelessness. Phoenix: Oryx, 1996, p. 31.

Photo by Sharon Morrison

By definition, a mental illness refers to a condition that is causing an impairment in function or life role. People suffering the effects of mental illness are at the same risk as of loss of income and social support as people suffering from physical illnesses. Access to programs and services that help maintain function can be complex to access and navigate. Even worse: researchers find that homelessness itself has been found to impair the psychological functioning of homeless people, regardless of age, gender, diagnosis, or medical/psychological history.

Substance Use Disorders



Photo by Shane Bauer

... approximately **26%**
of the homeless
population is dealing
with issues of substance
abuse.

Similarly, substance use disorders are understood to be both psychological and physiological illnesses. Persons suffering addiction to alcohol or substances struggle to maintain their diseases, and like other ill persons, are vulnerable to life crises that threaten a stable existence.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

- 27% history foster care, group home, or other institutional setting
- 25% history childhood physical or sexual abuse
- 21% history childhood homelessness
- 33% ran away from home
- 22% forced to leave home



Photo by Sharon Morrison

Self-report data from Interagency Council on Homelessness, 1999

In the adult population :

27% have a history of being in foster care, a group home, or another institutional setting;

25% have a history of childhood physical or sexual abuse;

21 percent experienced homelessness as a child;

33 percent ran away from home,

and 22 percent were forced to leave home.

Adverse childhood experiences are powerful risk factors for adult homelessness

Housing costs



Photo by Carol Thundstrum

In addition to Poverty, Lack of Affordable Housing is a cause of Homelessness. Federal funding for affordable housing has been sorely inadequate over the past 30 years; in the private market, gentrification has replaced inexpensive housing with luxury residential or commercial property, without provision for those displaced.

Poverty: Hunger

- 16% of requests for emergency food assistance went unmet
- 48% of people requesting emergency food assistance were members of families
- Requests for emergency food assistance increased 10% from previous year in 80% of the cities

U.S. Conference of Mayors Report, 2002 and 2007

People in poverty struggle to find money for food. (Read first bullet.)

In 2002, 16% of request for emergency food assistance went unmet. 48% of those people requesting emergency assistance were members of families. In 2007,, requests for emergency food assistance increased ten percent from the previous year in eighty percent of the cities surveyed. Food costs continue to rise faster than incomes.

Lack of Affordable Housing



1.7 Million units

- Average wait for public housing = 20 months
- Average wait for a Section 8 Voucher = 35 months

Right now, our nation would need 1.7 million housing units to fill the gap in affordable housing for extremely low-income households.

Even for people who qualify, the average wait for public housing is twenty months.

The average wait for a Section 8 Voucher – a program that helps low income renters afford private housing -- is thirty-five months.

In the next video segment, HCH members give first-hand accounts of different causes of homelessness.