



National Coalition for the Homeless

2201 P. St. NW Washington, DC 20037

Phone: (202) 462-4822 Fax: (202) 462-4823

Email: [info@nationalhomeless.org](mailto:info@nationalhomeless.org) | Website: <http://www.nationalhomeless.org>

## Fact Sheet for College Students

### Definition of Homelessness:

The word homeless translates to “without a home,” so the definition of a homeless person would logically be “a person without a home,” right?

Not necessarily. There are so many other factors that must be in place when determining the definition of homelessness. The federal government has defined a homeless person using a set of very narrow criteria and will provide their services only to those fitting those criteria.

According to the Stewart B. McKinney Act, 42 U.S.C. § 11301, *et seq.* (1994), a person is considered homeless who "lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence; and... has a primary night time residency that is: (A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations... (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized, or (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings." The term “homeless individual” does not include any individual imprisoned or otherwise detained pursuant to an Act of Congress or a state law." *42 U.S.C. § 11302(c)*

The education subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Act includes a more comprehensive definition of homelessness. This statute states that the term ‘homeless child and youth’ (A) means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence... and (B) includes: (i) children and youth who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, and includes children and youth who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement; (ii) children and youth who have a primary nighttime residence that is a private or public place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings... (iii) children and youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings, and (iv) migratory children...who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances

described in clauses (i) through (iii). *McKinney-Vento Act sec. 725(2); 42 U.S.C. 11435(2)*.

However, even with this more comprehensive definition, there are still parts of the homeless population left out. The federal government makes it very clear that a person living in substandard housing or with relatives is not considered “homeless” and therefore is not eligible for services. But homeless people who are living in rural areas of the country don’t have access to shelters or transitional housing services because they don’t exist in those areas. These people are more likely to live in substandard housing or with relatives or friends, and even though they technically are “without a home,” they are still not considered “homeless” by the government.

## **Statistics**

Homelessness is a widespread and very serious issue that affects a diverse population. According to a 2006 study done by the US Conference of Mayors, 42% of homeless people were African American, 39% were Caucasian, 13% were Hispanic, 4% were Native American, and 2% were Asian.

40% of homeless men have served in the armed forces.

A 2005 report by the US Conference of Mayors found that 16% of the homeless population suffered from a mental illness.

A report by the US Conference of Mayors designated the five “meanest cities” in the United States based on the number of anti-homeless laws in the city, the severity of the penalties for breaking those laws, the general political climate towards homeless people in the city, the homeless local advocate support, and the criminalization legislation that has taken place in the city. Their findings were:

1. Sarasota, FL
2. Lawrence, KS
3. Little Rock, AR
4. Atlanta, GA
5. Las Vegas, NV

## **Causes of Homelessness**

The reasons why people are homeless vary immensely, and each person has a different story to tell. However, there are some general causes of homelessness in the United States, some due to federal laws and regulations and the economy, and others due to the personal choices of the homeless individual.

### 1. Unable to Pay Rent

Often times a homeless person works one or two minimum wage jobs full time and still doesn't make enough money to pay rent. A Fact Sheet put out by the National Coalition reports: "Declining wages, in turn, have put housing out of reach for many workers: in every state, more than the minimum wage is required to afford a one- or two-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent.<sup>1</sup> A recent U.S. Conference of Mayors report stated that in every state more than the minimum-wage is required to afford a one or two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing. In 2001, five million rental households had "worst case housing needs," which means that they paid more than half their incomes for rent, living in severely substandard housing, or both (Children's Defense Fund, 2005). The primary source of income for 80% of these households was earnings from jobs" (U.S. Housing and Urban Development, 2001).

### 2. Mental Illness

Some homeless people have mental illnesses or disabilities, and as a result struggle with finding housing. According to a study by the US Conference of Mayors in 2005, approximately 16% of the homeless population suffers from a mental illness. A report put out by the National Coalition for the Homeless says that in 2006 the amount of money it cost to rent a one-bedroom apartment was \$715 a month, which is 113.1% of a person on Supplemental Security Income. In 1999, in over 125 housing markets throughout the country, the cost of a one bedroom apartment was more than a person's total monthly SSI income. In 2006, the national average rent for a studio apartment became higher than the income of a person who relies solely on SSI income. Only 9% of people not in mental hospitals or facilities receiving SSI have housing assistance.

### 3. Domestic Violence

Another major cause of homelessness is domestic violence. Battered women who live in poverty are often forced to choose between abusive relationships and homelessness. In a study of 777 homeless parents (the majority of whom were mothers) in ten U.S. cities, 22% said they had left their last place of residence because of domestic violence (Homes for the Homeless, 1998). In addition, 50% of the cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). Studying the entire country, though, reveals that the problem is even more serious. Nationally, approximately half of all women and children experiencing homelessness are fleeing domestic violence (Zorza, 1991; National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2001).

### 4. Unaffordable Health Care

---

<sup>1</sup> FMRs are the monthly amounts "needed to rent privately owned, decent, safe, and sanitary rental housing of a modest (non-luxury) nature with suitable amenities." Federal Register. HUD determines FMRs for localities in all 50 states.

Health Care in the United States is not universal and is often extremely expensive. Homeless people are unable to afford basic doctor's visits so they often go untreated for illnesses. Those with mental illness or disabilities often could hold a job or maintain a stable lifestyle if they were able to access medications and services that would assist them. Unfortunately, those medications and services are expensive without health insurance, and most health insurance plans are also too expensive to purchase. In 2004, approximately 45.8 million Americans had no health care insurance. That equates to 15.7% of the population (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). Nearly a third of persons living in poverty had no health insurance of any kind. The coverage held by many others would not carry them through a catastrophic illness.

## 5. Addictions and Substance Abuse

While federal policies and the state of the economy are major causes of homelessness, addictions and substance abuse also plays a large role. Without access to affordable treatment services, many low-income people suffering from addictions are unable to keep their jobs, and subsequently lose their homes and end up on the streets.

### **Violence Against Homeless People**

From January-June of 2008, there have been 26 reported assaults against homeless people and 13 of those have resulted in death. Hate crimes against homeless people are a serious issue facing the country today, and the National Coalition for the Homeless is working tirelessly to get homeless people into the hate crimes statutes for each state. This would allow a higher penalty for those convicted of assault against a homeless person because it would be considered a hate crime. Legislation has yet to be passed in the courts regarding this issue on a federal level, but a few states have taken action individually. Alaska is the most recent state to classify homeless people as a "vulnerable person" and as a result the punishment for a crime committed against them is higher.

Most often, the perpetrators of these crimes are youth, with the youngest reported age being 10 years old. The crimes vary, ranging from taunting a homeless person with ethnic or racial slurs to burning the person in a blanket or other flammable material or physically beating the person with a baseball bat or other weapon.

Unfortunately, many hate crimes against homeless people go unreported because the victim is afraid of future retaliation from their attacker. So while the numbers for the reported hate crimes against homeless people in 2008 are high, chances are the actual number of attacks occurring is much higher.

Hate crimes narratives for 2008:

In Peoria, Illinois, officers responded to a call from employees at a McDonalds saying that a man was inside the restaurant and was bleeding from his head. The victim, 39, was not alert, according to police, and only responded to questions when the police officers spoke loudly or shook him. The information that the authorities managed to gather was that the man was attacked and kicked in the head by three youths, but he could not recall what the boys looked like or where the attack happened. The man was taken to OSF Saint Francis Medical Center for treatment.

Two homeless men were the victims of an attack on Easter Sunday in Bartlett, Tennessee. Brenner Holloman, one of the victims, was unhurt from the attack but witnessed everything. The attackers, adult males ages 19-22, used Molotov cocktails, a homemade concoction that consists of a bottle filled with gasoline and set on fire. Holloman claimed the flames only made the attackers laugh harder, and “they thought it was funny all right, they absolutely did.” Holloman now says he can hardly recognize his friend, Jeffery Martin. “It made me ill, he reports. “I just saw him yesterday, his head ballooned out to there...his scalp was taken off, his right hand is completely bandaged up...” Martin reports that it “was the worst pain I’ve ever been in in my life.” Martin sustained second and third degree burns to his head, neck, ears, shoulders and hands. Police found the attackers to be 20 year old Michael Grace, 19 year old Andrew Colin Hicks, 22 year old John Tyler Eggleston and 19 year old Zach Addison Parrish. All four have been charged with attempted aggravated arson, and Parrish was charged with the additional attempted second degree murder, as police suspect he threw the flaming bottle at the victims. Eggleston and Grace pleaded not guilty to the charges and waived their preliminary hearing.

## **Government Action**

There are some federal programs that address the issue of homelessness and work to get homeless people off the streets and into a home of their own. There are three main services that the government offers that help homeless people find housing.

1. **Section 8/Public Housing:** The Section 8 program provides assistance to people living in privately owned apartments by allowing the person to pay 30% of their income towards the rent and have the government pay the rest. Public Housing does the same thing except it’s for people living in housing provided for by the government.
2. **HUD Homeless Assistance Grants:** The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) helps to fund programs that work towards ending homelessness. They also provide money for shelters, transitional housing, and other services that homeless people need.

3. Health Care for the Homeless: A program that provides the health care services to the homeless in an affordable way so that the person can receive care that they would otherwise not be able to get because they can't afford it.

### **Campus Action**

There are an infinite number of ways for college students to get involved in the issues surrounding homelessness. College students are socially aware and have the energy and enthusiasm to make a difference. It is so important to take a stand on these issues both in your own communities at home and on campus.

The National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness is an amazing resource that works with college students around the country to end hunger and homelessness. Their website is <http://www.studentsagainsthunger.org> and they have additional resources on the site to use for programming.

Additional ways to get involved on campus are:

1. Organize a clothing drive and donate the items to a local shelter.
2. Write your congressman or representative and urge them to support legislation that will benefit homeless people. If you are in the Washington, DC area, set up an appointment with a staffer in the congressional office and discuss the issues surrounding homelessness and poverty.
3. Volunteer with a local shelter or food bank
4. Get connected to a coalition. Visit NCH's directory of organizations at <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/resources/natdirect.html>
5. Organize a Faces of Homelessness Panel—The NCH has a speakers' bureau consisting of formerly homeless or currently homeless individuals who come to speak about their experiences. Contact Michael O'Neill, the Speakers' Bureau Director at 202-462-4822 ext. 223, or email him at [moneill@nationalhomeless.org](mailto:moneill@nationalhomeless.org)
6. Participate in a Homeless Challenge—spend 24 or 48 hours on the streets with homeless guides and learn about the challenges of being homeless first-hand. Call the National Coalition for the Homeless for more information at 202-462-4822.

Sources: National Coalition for the Homeless, Fact Sheet #19 "How You Can Help End Homelessness, [www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org)  
National Coalition for the Homeless, Fact Sheet #21 "Hate Crimes And Violence Against People Experiencing Homelessness, [www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org)  
National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet, Why Are People Homeless, [www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org)

National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet, Who Is Homeless?

[www.nationalhomeless.org](http://www.nationalhomeless.org)

National Coalition for the Homeless, City Mayors Society, “Report Accuses US of Criminalizing the Homeless”, [http://www.citymayors.com/society/homeless\\_usa2.html](http://www.citymayors.com/society/homeless_usa2.html)