



National Coalition for the Homeless

2201 P St., NW, • Washington, DC 20037-1033

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

Email: info@nationalhomeless.org | Website: <http://www.nationalhomeless.org>

Rural Homelessness

NCH Fact Sheet #11

Published by the National Coalition for the Homeless, August 2007

Homelessness is often assumed to be an urban phenomenon because homeless people are more numerous, more geographically concentrated, and more visible in urban areas. However, people experience the same difficulties associated with homelessness and housing distress in America's small towns and rural areas as they do in urban areas. Problems defining, locating, and sampling have made enumerating the homeless population with certainty virtually impossible with estimates commonly relying on counts of persons using services that are inaccessible. Some of what has been learned in recent years about the causes, consequences, and strategies for combating homelessness in rural areas is summarized below. Resources for further study are also provided.

DEFINITIONS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Understanding rural homelessness requires a more flexible definition of homelessness. There are far fewer shelters in rural areas than in urban areas; therefore, people experiencing homelessness are less likely to live on the street or in a shelter and more likely to live in a car or camper, or with relatives in overcrowded or substandard housing. Restricting definitions of homelessness to include only those who are literally homeless - that is, on the streets or in shelters - does not fit well with the rural reality, and also may exclude many rural communities from accessing federal dollars to address homelessness.

Rurality is typically defined in contrast to urbanicity. The most commonly used definitions are based on population density and proximity to metropolitan areas such as those developed by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Prior to 2003, OMB defined a "metropolitan community" as a population nucleus with a population of 50,000 or more and the economically tied surrounding area; communities with more than 5,000 but fewer than 50,000 people were designated as "urban clusters." Rural areas constitute all "territory, population, and housing units not classified as urban" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005).

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines a homeless person as, "(1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is-(A) a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill); (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." This definition has created an atmosphere in which most rural communities do not count

persons living in rural substandard structures as homeless, leaving a portion of those who are homeless in rural areas unidentified while their counterparts are being counted in urban communities.

Studies comparing urban and rural homeless populations have shown that homeless people in rural areas are more likely to be white, female, married, currently working, homeless for the first time, and homeless for a shorter period of time (Fisher, 2005). Other research indicates that families, single mothers, and children make up the largest group of people who are homeless in rural areas (Vissing, 1996). Homelessness among Native Americans and migrant workers is also largely a rural phenomenon. Findings also include higher rates of domestic violence and lower rates of alcohol and substance abuse.

CAUSES

Rural homelessness, like urban homelessness, is the result of poverty and a lack of affordable housing. In 2005, research shows that the odds of being poor are between 1.2 to 2.3 times higher for people in nonmetropolitan areas, than in metropolitan areas. One in five nonmetro counties is classified as a high poverty county (defined as having a poverty rate of 20% or higher), while only one in twenty metro counties are defined as high poverty (Fisher, 2005). Furthermore, in 2005, 15.1 percent of rural Americans were living in poverty compared with 12.5 percent of non-rural Americans (Jensen, 2006). Rural homelessness is most pronounced in rural regions that are primarily agricultural; regions whose economies are based on declining extractive industries such as mining, timber, or fishing; and regions experiencing economic growth -- for example, areas with industrial plants that attract more workers than jobs available, and areas near urban centers that attract new businesses and higher income residents, thereby driving up taxes and living expenses (Aron and Fitchen, 1996).

It has been shown that fewer job opportunities, lower wages, and longer periods of unemployment also plague the rural poor more often than their urban counterparts (Bread for the World Institute, 2005). A lack of decent affordable housing underlies both rural and urban homelessness. While housing costs are lower in rural areas, so are rural incomes, leading to similarly high rent burdens. Problems of housing quality also contribute to rural homelessness: in rural areas, 30% of nonmetro households, or 6.2 million households, have at least one major housing problem (Housing Assistance Council, 2002). Rural residential histories reveal that homelessness is often precipitated by a structural or physical housing problem jeopardizing health or safety; when families relocate to safer housing, the rent is often too much to manage and they experience homelessness again while searching for housing that is both safe and affordable. Other trends affecting rural homelessness include the distance between low-cost housing and employment opportunities, lack of transportation, decline in homeownership, restrictive land-use regulations and housing codes, rising rent burdens, and insecure tenancy resulting from changes in the local real estate market (for example, the displacement of trailer park residents) (Fitchen, 1992).

POLICY ISSUES

Efforts to end rural homelessness are complicated by isolation, lack of awareness, and lack of resources. Helpful initiatives would include broadening the definition of homelessness to include those in temporary and/or dilapidated facilities, increasing outreach to isolated areas, and increasing networking and awareness on a national level. Ultimately, however, ending homelessness in rural areas requires jobs that pay a living wage, adequate income supports for those who cannot work, affordable housing, access to health care, and transportation.

RESOURCES:

Aron, Laudan Y. and Janet M. Fitchen. "Rural Homelessness: A Synopsis," in [Homelessness in America](#), Oryx Press, 1996. Available for \$43.50 from the National Coalition for the Homeless, 1612 K Street, NW, #1004, Washington, DC 20008-2802; 202/775-1322.

Bread for the World Institute. [Strengthening Rural Communities: Hunger Report 2005](#) (pg 48 used). Available for free at www.bread.org.

First, Richard, Beverly Toomey, and John Rife. [Preliminary Findings on Rural Homelessness](#), 1990. Available, for free, from 300 Stillman Hall, 1947 College Road , 1050 Carmack Rd., Columbus, OH 43210; 614/292-4033.

Fisher, Monica. [Why Is U.S. Poverty Higher in Nonmetropolitan than Metropolitan Areas?](#), 2005. Rural Poverty Research Center. Available at www.rprconline.org.

Fitchen, Janet. "On the Edge of Homelessness: Rural Poverty and Housing Insecurity," [Rural Sociology](#) 57 (1992) 173-93. Available for \$20.00 from Professor Raybel Burdge, Rural Sociological Society, Dept. of Sociology, Arntzen Hall, Room 510, Western Washington University, Bellingham, WA 98225-9081; 360/650-7571.

Housing Assistance Council. [Taking Stock: Rural People, Poverty, and Housing at the Turn of the 21st Century](#), 2002. Available at www.ruralhome.org.

Jensen, L. [At the Razor's Edge: Building Hope for America's Rural Poor](#). *Rural Realities*, 1, pg. 1-18, 2006.

Kentucky Housing Corporation. [Kentucky Homeless Survey- Preliminary Findings](#), 1993. Available, for free, from the Kentucky Housing Corporation, 1231 Louisville Rd., Frankfort, KY 40601-6191; 502/564-7630 ext.348.

U.S. Census Bureau, Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division. [Poverty: Definitions and Explanations of Terms](#). Current Available, free, from [U.S. Bureau of the Census](#), Income Statistics Branch, Washington, DC, 20233-0001; 301/763-8576, or at <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty.html>.

U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Economic and Community Development. [Rural Homelessness: Focusing on the Needs of the Rural Homeless](#), 1996. Available, for free, from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Rural Housing Service, Rural Economic and Community Development, 14th St. and Independence Ave., SW, Washington, DC 20250-1533; 202/690-1533.

Vissing, Yvonne. [Out of Sight, Out of Mind: Homeless Children and Families in Small-Town America](#), 1996. Available for \$16.96 (paperback) from The University Press of Kentucky, 663 S. Limestone St., Lexington, KY 40508-4008, 800/839-6855.