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Who is Homeless?

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This fact sheet reviews definitions of homelessness and describes the demographic characteristics of persons who experience homelessness. A list of resources for further study is also provided.

DEFINITIONS

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 **t**he 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).*

Other federal agencies, such as the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), interpret the McKinney-Vento definition to include only those persons who are on the streets or in shelters and persons who face imminent eviction (within a week) from a private dwelling or institution and who have no subsequent residence or resources to obtain housing. This interpretation of homelessness serves large, urban communities where tens of thousands of people are literally homeless. However, it may prove problematic for those persons who are

homeless in areas of the country, such as rural areas, where there are few shelters. People experiencing homelessness in these areas are less likely to live on the street or in a shelter, and more likely to live with relatives in overcrowded or substandard housing (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1996).

DEMOGRAPHICS

Two trends are largely responsible for the rise in homelessness over the past 20-25 years: a growing shortage of affordable rental housing and a simultaneous increase in poverty. Persons living in poverty are most at risk of becoming homeless, and demographic groups who are more likely to experience poverty are also more likely to experience homelessness. Recent demographic statistics are summarized below.

AGE

In 2003, children under the age of 18 accounted for 39% of the homeless population; 42% of these children were under the age of five (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004). This same study found that unaccompanied minors comprised 5% of the urban homeless population. However, in other cities and especially in rural areas, the numbers of children experiencing homelessness are much higher. According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, in 2004, 25% of homeless were ages 25 to 34; the same study found percentages of homeless persons aged 55 to 64 at 6%.

GENDER

Most studies show that single homeless adults are more likely to be male than female. In 2005, a survey by the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that single men comprised 51% of the homeless population and single women comprised 17% (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005).

FAMILIES

The number of homeless families with children has increased significantly over the past decade. Families with children are among the fastest growing segments of the homeless population. In its 2005 survey of 25 American cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayors found that families with children comprised 33% of the homeless population, a definite increase from previous years (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). These proportions are likely to be higher in rural areas. Research indicates that families, single mothers, and children make up the largest group of people who are homeless in rural areas (Vissing, 1996).

As the number of families experiencing homelessness rises and the number of affordable housing units shrinks, families are subject to much longer stays in the shelter system. For instance, in the mid-1990s in New York, families stayed in a shelter an average of five months before moving on to permanent housing. Today, the average stay is seven months, and some surveys say the average is closer to a year (U. S. Conference of Mayors, 2005 and Santos, 2002). For more information, see our fact sheet on Homeless Families with Children**.**

ETHNICITY

In its 2004 survey of 27 cities, the U.S. Conference of Mayor found that the homeless population was 49% African-American, 35% Caucasian, 13% Hispanic, 2% Native American, and 1% Asian (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2001). Like the total U.S. population, the ethnic makeup of homeless populations varies according to geographic location. For example, people experiencing homelessness in rural areas are much more likely to be white; homelessness among Native Americans and migrant workers is also largely a rural phenomenon (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1996).

VICTIMS OF 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). A 2003 survey of 100 homeless mothers in 10 locations around the country found that 25% of the women had been physically abused in the last year (American Civil Liberties Union, 2004). In addition, 50% of the 24 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). For more information, see our fact sheet on Domestic Violence and Homelessness.

VETERANS

Research indicates that 40% of homeless men have served in the armed forces, as compared to 34% of the general adult male population (Rosenheck et al., 1996). In 2005, the U.S. Conference of Mayors' survey of 24 American cities found that 11% of the homeless population were veterans – however, this does not take gender into account (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans estimates that on any given night, 271,000 veterans are homeless (National Coalition for Homeless Veterans, 1994). For more information, see our fact sheet on Homeless Veterans.

PERSONS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Approximately 16% of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of severe and persistent mental illness (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). According to the Federal Task Force on Homelessness and Severe Mental Illness, only 5-7% of homeless persons with mental illness require institutionalization; most can live in the community with the appropriate supportive housing options (Federal Task Force on Homelessness and Severe Mental Illness, 1992). For more information, see our fact sheet on Mental Illness and Homelessness.

PERSONS SUFFERING FROM ADDICTION DISORDERS

Surveys of homeless populations conducted during the 1980s found consistently high rates of addiction, particularly among single men; however, recent research has called the results of those studies into question (Koegel et al., 1996). Briefly put, the studies that produced high prevalence rates greatly over represented long-term shelter users and single men, and used lifetime rather than current measures of addiction. While there is no generally accepted "magic number" with respect to the prevalence of addiction disorders among homeless adults, the U.S. Conference of

Mayors' number in 2005 was 30%, and the frequently cited figure of about 65% is probably at least double the real rate for current addiction disorders among all single adults who are homeless in a year. For more information, see our fact sheet on Addiction Disorders and Homelessness.

EMPLOYMENT

Declining wages 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.[1] (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2001). In fact, in the median state a minimum-wage worker would have to work 89 hours each week to afford a two-bedroom apartment at 30% of his or her income, which is the federal definition of affordable housing (National Low Income Housing Coalition 2001). Thus, inadequate income leaves many people homeless. The U.S. Conference of Mayors' 2005 survey of 24 American cities found that 13% of the urban homeless population were employed (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005), though recent surveys by the U.S. Conference of Mayors have reported as high as 25%. In a number of cities not surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors - as well as in many states - the percentage is even higher (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1997). For more information, see our factsheets on Employment and Homelessness and Why Are People Homeless?.

IMPLICATIONS

As this fact sheet makes clear, people who become homeless do not fit one general description. However, people experiencing homelessness do have certain shared basic needs, including affordable housing, adequate incomes, and health care. Some homeless people may need additional services such as mental health or drug treatment in order to remain securely housed. All of these needs must be met to prevent and to end homelessness.

FOOTNOTES

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

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