Inquiry Question: Who are the homeless and what can we do to help?

Lesson Title: Homelessness: Fact or Myth

Description: Student will examine their preconceived notions of the homeless, learn who the homeless are and explore ways to help the homeless.

Objective: The students will be able to:

- Help students explore ethical and moral issues related to society’s treatment of the homeless.

Student Development Framework Standards and Program Benchmarks:

Benchmark PS 4.2  
Show respect and tolerance for cultural, ethnic and human diversity.

Benchmark CC 3.1  
Describe the effects that societal, economic, and technological changes have on a career.

FCAT Benchmarks:

- LA.A.1.3.2 Uses a variety of strategies to analyze words and text, draw conclusions.
- LA.A. 2.3.1 Determines the main idea or essential message in a text.

Accommodations:

- Teachers should provide students with accommodations listed on their IEP.

Instructional Time: One hour.

Teacher Preparation:

Read the following handouts prior to class:
National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet 1 Why Are People Homeless?  
National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet 2 How Many People Experience Homelessness?  
National Coalition for the Homeless Fact Sheet 3 Who is Homeless?

Instructional Materials:

- Handout: Guidelines for essay on the homeless  
- Handout: Fact Or Myth  
- Handout: Fact or Myth Answer Key
Spring Board:

Ask students to write a short narrative on “Who are the homeless?” Encourage students to include their assumptions, interactions and feelings towards the homeless.

Instructional Lesson:

- Explain to the students that the object of the lesson is to challenge their pre-conceived notion of who the homeless are and to explore who they are.
- Ask if there are any students willing to share their narrative with the class.
- Divide classroom in equal groups and distribute the handout titled “Homeless Population Estimates”. Ask each group to work together and estimate the percentage for each category and graph the data on the pie chart provided. Allow students sufficient time to discuss and complete their chart. Ask each group to write their percentages on the board.
- Distribute the “Homeless Breakdown” handout and compare the data to the students’ answer. Teacher should point out any differences or similarities in their data.
- Distribute the “Fact or Myth” handout. Allow students sufficient time to complete the exercise.
- Distribute the “Fact or Myth” answer key and allow students to check and compare their answers (Reciprocal Teaching). Select a student to read each answer and discuss the individual items in class discussion (teachers should be familiar with NCH Fact Sheet 1, 2, & 3).
- Distribute the “NCH Fact Sheet # 1” to each student. Students should be grouped into 5 groups and assigned one of five areas addressed in the article.
- Each group will summarize their portion of the article and present it to the class.
- Brainstorming sessions with students will generate ways that students can help the homeless. Suggestions should include: Volunteering at a shelter or soup kitchen; contacting churches or local charities for opportunities to become involved; writing to your representative and senators; and creating a school services project to collect food or clothing.

Assessments: Fact Or Myth, Homeless population estimates, My Pie Chart Handouts spring board narratives and home learning assignment.

Follow-up Activities/Home Learning/Parent:
Students will write a paragraph describing some of their previous assumptions and how they have changed after the lesson. Additionally, students will provide the name of a place or organization where they could assist the homeless.
Guidelines for Essay on Homelessness

One of your assignments is to write an essay on homelessness. Please choose a topic that is relevant to issues of homelessness. After attending the conference on homelessness, please use the information gathered there as well as your reactions. Use this as a basis for further exploration as you compare, contrast, and add new insights.

Your essay must be substantial in content and length and will be a significant part of your grade.

Take your time when writing and organizing your thoughts into a persuasive essay. Please feel free to state your opinions and thoughts on the topic.

Excerpted Reflections from High School Students Across The Nation

People all over America are suffering from homelessness. It does not matter who you are, where you are, or how old you are. Anyone can be homeless, and it can happen in the blink of an eye. Most people think that homeless people are alcoholics or drug addicts who don't want to get a job or help themselves. Most people think that they just want to beg for money on the streets so they can buy more drugs and alcohol, but this is not true.... I think if the government gave more money to societies and groups that try to help the homeless, there would be less people having to sleep on the street....

A home is the first shelter or haven everyone grows up in, learning, trusting, and relying on everyone in it as a family. It is a basic necessity for every living creature - humans, animals, and insects. It provides everything from love, care, protection, and education. Hence, it is a right for everyone to have a home, not a privilege...If we join our hands together as a community, looking out for everyone's needs and problems, we cannot only erase homelessness, but also make this society a better place....

Homelessness results from a complex set of circumstances that require people to choose between food, shelter, and other basic needs. Only a concerted effort to ensure jobs that pay a living wage, adequate support for those who cannot work, affordable housing, and access to health care will bring an end to homelessness. Many people have left the streets, but have taken complex problems, acute mental health problems and addictions, with them. Without help, they will never escape their downward spiral of despair, and some will even end up back on the streets...
1. **Fact or Myth**  The homeless are responsible for their own situation.

2. **Fact or Myth**  Families with children who are currently living with relatives because they cannot afford their own housing are considered homeless.

3. **Fact or Myth**  Nearly all homeless people suffer from mental illness or have a substance abuse problem.

4. **Fact or Myth**  Many homeless people are employed either full or part-time.

5. **Fact or Myth**  Men constitute the majority of the homeless population.

6. **Fact or Myth**  Homeless people remain homeless for long periods of time.

7. **Fact or Myth**  The needs of the homeless far exceed the resources of charitable groups.

8. **Fact or Myth**  The homeless are more likely to be the victims rather than the perpetrators of crimes.

9. **Fact or Myth**  Creating more shelters and programs for the homeless will encourage homeless people from other places to come to our city.

10. **Fact or Myth**  Homeless people do not work and rely solely on handouts and government assistance.


Fact or Myth Answer Key

1. Myth Many homeless people have been victims of violence, child abuse, or natural disasters. Some are unemployed, ill and many are children.

2. Fact The McKinney Act (1994) states that children “who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason”, fall under the category of “homeless child and youth”.

3. Myth According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors 2005 report only 30% of the homeless population are substance abusers and 22% are severely mentally ill.

4. Fact According to the U.S. Conference of Mayors 2005 report, 15% of the urban homeless population are employed. Furthermore, recent surveys estimate the actual number may be closer to 25%.

5. Myth The number of homeless families, single women and unaccompanied youth continue to be a large and growing group. Men currently make up 43% of the homeless population. (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005)

6. Myth The length of time people transition in and out of homelessness and for what amount of time varies substantially. However, recent research indicates that 70% of homeless people are homeless for less than two years and 40% report being homeless for less than six months.

7. Fact Homelessness continues to grow and charitable organizations are unable to meet the demand. It will take a collaborative effort between the federal and state governments, charitable organizations and an active populace to effectively address the needs of the homeless.

8. Fact The homeless are less likely “to commit crimes against persons or property”. Crimes associated with homelessness are “non-violent and non-destructive crimes”. (Myths & Facts About Homelessness, ASU West)

9. Myth The majority (75%) of homeless people remain in the same city. Homeless are more likely to travel to a new place
because of relatives, opportunities for work or other reasons not related to services.

10. Myth  “Current TANF (Temporary Assistance to Needy Families) benefits and Food Stamps combined are below poverty level in every state. In fact, current maximum TANF benefits for a single mother of two children is 29% of the federal poverty level,” (NCH, 2006)  “Early findings suggest that although more families are moving from welfare to work, many of them are fairing poorly due to low wages and inadequate work supports,”(NCH, 2006)


Homeless Population Estimates

Please estimate the percentage for each of the groups that make-up the homeless population. Please graph your results below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Single Men</td>
<td>________%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Single Women</td>
<td>________%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>________%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>________%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MY PIE CHART

TITLE: ________________________________
Homeless Population

- Single Men: 45%
- Families: 34%
- Single Women: 18%
- Youth: 3%

Why Are People Homeless?

NCH Fact Sheet #1

Published by the National Coalition for the Homeless, June 2006

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. Below is an overview of current poverty and housing statistics, as well as additional factors contributing to homelessness. A list of resources for further study is also provided.

POVERTY

Homelessness and poverty are inextricably linked. Poor people are frequently unable to pay for housing, food, childcare, health care, and education. Difficult choices must be made when limited resources cover only some of these necessities. Often it is housing, which absorbs a high proportion of income that must be dropped. Being poor means being an illness, an accident, or a paycheck away from living on the streets.

In 2004, 12.7% of the U.S. population, or 37 million people, lived in poverty. Both the poverty rate and the number of poor people have increased in recent years, up from 12.5% in 2003, and up 1.1 million from 2003 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). 36% of persons living in poverty are children; in fact, the 2004 poverty rate of 17.6% for children under 18 years old is significantly higher than the poverty rate for any other age group.

Two factors help account for increasing poverty: eroding employment opportunities for large segments of the workforce, and the declining value and availability of public assistance.

Eroding Work Opportunities

Media reports of a growing economy and low unemployment mask a number of important reasons why homelessness persists, and, in some areas of the country, is worsening. These reasons include stagnant or falling incomes and less secure jobs which offer fewer benefits.

While the last few years have seen growth in real wages at all levels, these increases have not been enough to counteract a long pattern of stagnant and declining wages. Low-wage workers have been particularly hard hit by wage trends and have been left behind as the disparity between rich and poor has mushroomed. To compound the
problem, the real value of the minimum wage in 2004 was 26% less than in 1979 (The Economic Policy Institute, 2005). Although incomes appear to be rising, this growth is largely due to more hours worked – which in turn can be attributed to welfare reform and the tight labor markets. Factors contributing to wage declines include a steep drop in the number and bargaining power of unionized workers; erosion in the value of the minimum wage; a decline in manufacturing jobs and the corresponding expansion of lower-paying service-sector employment; globalization; and increased nonstandard work, such as temporary and part-time employment (Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt, 1999).

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. 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).

The connection between impoverished workers and homelessness can be seen in homeless shelters, many of which house significant numbers of full-time wage earners. A survey of 24 U.S. cities found that 15% of persons in homeless situations are employed (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). Surveys in past years have yielded the percentage of homeless working to be as high as 26% (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2000). 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).

The future of job growth does not appear promising for many workers: a 1998 study estimated that 46% of the jobs with the most growth between 1994 and 2005 pay less than $16,000 a year; these jobs will not lift families out of poverty (National Priorities Project, 1998). Moreover, 74% of these jobs pay below a livable wage ($32,185 for a family of four). Thus, for many Americans, work provides no escape from poverty. The benefits of economic growth have not been equally distributed; instead, they have been concentrated at the top of income and wealth distributions. A rising tide does not lift all boats; and in the United States today, many boats are struggling to stay afloat.

**Decline in Public Assistance**

The declining value and availability of public assistance is another source of increasing poverty and homelessness. Until its repeal in August 1996, the largest cash assistance program for poor families with children was the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) program. The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (the federal welfare reform law) repealed the AFDC program and replaced it with a block grant program called Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Current
TANF benefits and Food Stamps combined are below the poverty level in every state; in fact, the current maximum TANF benefit for a single mother of two children is 29% of the federal poverty level (Nickelson, 2004). Thus, contrary to popular opinion, welfare does not provide relief from poverty.

Welfare caseloads have dropped sharply since the passage and implementation of welfare reform legislation. However, declining welfare rolls simply mean that fewer people are receiving benefits -- not that they are employed or doing better financially. Early findings suggest that although more families are moving from welfare to work, many of them are faring poorly due to low wages and inadequate work supports. Only a small fraction of welfare recipients’ new jobs pay above-poverty wages; most of the new jobs pay far below the poverty line (Children’s Defense Fund and the National Coalition for the Homeless, 1998). These statistics from the Institute for Children and Poverty are particularly revealing:

In the 2001 Institute for Children and Poverty study, 37% of homeless families had their welfare benefits reduced or cut in the last year. More strikingly, in Bucks County and Philadelphia, PA, and Seattle, WA, more than 50% had their benefits reduced or cut...Among those who lost their benefits, 20% said they became homeless as a direct result. Additionally, a second study of six states found that between 1997 and 1998, 25% of families who had stopped receiving welfare in the last six months doubled-up on housing to save money, and 23% moved because they could not pay rent (Institute for Children and Poverty, 2001).

Moreover, extreme poverty is growing more common for children, especially those in female-headed and working families. This increase can be traced directly to the declining number of children lifted above one-half of the poverty line by government cash assistance for the poor (Children's Defense Fund and the National Coalition for the Homeless, 1998). As a result of loss of benefits, low wages, and unstable employment, many families leaving welfare struggle to get medical care, food, and housing. Many lose health insurance, despite continued Medicaid eligibility: a study found that 675,000 people lost health insurance in 1997 as a result of the federal welfare reform legislation, including 400,000 children (Families USA, 1999). Moreover, over 725,000 workers, laid off from their jobs due to the recession in 2000, lost their health insurance (Families USA, 2001). According to the Children’s Defense Fund, over nine million children in America have no health insurance, and over 90 percent of them are in working families.

In addition, housing is rarely affordable for families leaving welfare for low wages, yet subsidized housing is so limited that fewer than one in four TANF families nationwide lives in public housing or receives a housing voucher to help them rent a private unit. For most families leaving the rolls, housing subsidies are not an option. In some communities, former welfare families appear to be experiencing homelessness in increasing numbers (Children’s Defense Fund and the National Coalition for the Homeless, 1998).
In addition to the reduction in the value and availability of welfare benefits for families, recent policy changes have reduced or eliminated public assistance for poor single individuals. Several states have cut or eliminated General Assistance (GA) benefits for single impoverished people, despite evidence that the availability of GA reduces the prevalence of homelessness (Greenberg and Baumohl, 1996).

People with disabilities, too, must struggle to obtain and maintain stable housing. In 1998, on a national average, a person receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits had to spend 69% of his or her SSI monthly income to rent a one-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent; in more than 125 housing market areas, the cost of a one-bedroom apartment at Fair Market Rent was more than a person's total monthly SSI income (Technical Assistance Collaborative & the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities Housing Task Force, 1999). Today, only nine percent of non-institutionalized people receiving SSI receive housing assistance (Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, 2005).

Presently, most states have not replaced the old welfare system with an alternative that enables families and individuals to obtain above-poverty employment and to sustain themselves when work is not available or possible.

HOUSING

A lack of affordable housing and the limited scale of housing assistance programs have contributed to the current housing crisis and to homelessness.

The gap between the number of affordable housing units and the number of people needing them has created a housing crisis for poor people. Between 1973 and 1993, 2.2 million low-rent units disappeared from the market. These units were either abandoned, converted into condominiums or expensive apartments, or became unaffordable because of cost increases. Between 1991 and 1995, median rental costs paid by low-income renters rose 21%; at the same time, the number of low-income renters increased. Over these years, despite an improving economy, the affordable housing gap grew by one million (Daskal, 1998). Between 1970 and 1995, the gap between the number of low-income renters and the amount of affordable housing units skyrocketed from a nonexistent gap to a shortage of 4.4 million affordable housing units – the largest shortfall on record (Institute for Children and Poverty, 2001). According to HUD, in recent years the shortages of affordable housing are most severe for units affordable to renters with extremely low incomes. Federal support for low-income housing has fallen 49% from 1980 to 2003 (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2005).

More recently, the strong economy has caused rents to soar, putting housing out of reach for the poorest Americans. After the 1980s, income growth has never kept pace with rents, and since 2000, the incomes of low-income households has declined as rents continue to rise (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2005). The number of housing units that rent for less than $300, adjusted for inflation, declined from 6.8 million in 1996 to 5.5 million in 1998, a 19 percent drop of 1.3 million units (U.S. Department of Housing
The loss of affordable housing puts even greater numbers of people at risk of homelessness.

The lack of affordable housing has lead to high rent burdens (rents which absorb a high proportion of income), overcrowding, and substandard housing. These phenomena, in turn, have not only forced many people to become homeless; they have put a large and growing number of people at risk of becoming homeless. A 2001 Housing and Urban Development (HUD) study found that 4.9 million unassisted, very low-income households -- this is 10.9 million people, 3.6 million of whom are children -- had "worst case needs" for housing assistance in 1999 (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2001). Although this figure seems to be a decrease from 1997, it is misleading since, in the same two-year span, "the number of units affordable to extremely low-income renters dropped between 1997 and 1999 at an accelerated rate, and shortages of housing both affordable and available to these renters actually worsened (HUD Report on Worst Case Housing Needs, 1999).

Housing assistance can make the difference between stable housing, precarious housing, or no housing at all. However, the demand for assisted housing clearly exceeds the supply: only about one-third of poor renter households receive a housing subsidy from the federal, state, or a local government (Daskal, 1998). The limited level of housing assistance means that most poor families and individuals seeking housing assistance are placed on long waiting lists. From 1996 to 1998, the time households spent on waiting lists for HUD housing assistance grew dramatically. For the largest public housing authorities, a family's average time on a waiting list rose from 22 to 33 months from 1996 to 1998 -- a 50% increase (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 1999). The average waiting period for a Section 8 rental assistance voucher rose from 26 months to 28 months between 1996 and 1998. Today the average wait for Section 8 Vouchers is 35 months (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2004). Excessive waiting lists for public housing mean that people must remain in shelters or inadequate housing arrangements longer. 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. In a survey of 24 cities, people remain homeless an average of seven months, and 87% of cities reported that the length of time people are homeless has increased in recent years (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). Longer stays in homeless shelters a result in less shelter space available for other homeless people, who must find shelter elsewhere or live on the streets.

A housing trend with a particularly severe impact on homelessness is the loss of single room occupancy (SRO) housing. In the past, SRO housing served to house many poor individuals, including poor persons suffering from mental illness or substance abuse. From 1970 to the mid-1980s, an estimated one million SRO units were demolished (Dolbeare, 1996). The demolition of SRO housing was most notable in large cities: between 1970-1982, New York City lost 87% of its $200 per month or less SRO stock; Chicago experienced the total elimination of cubicule hotels; and by 1985, Los Angeles had lost more than half of its downtown SRO housing (Koegel, et al, 1996). From 1975 to 1988, San Francisco lost 43% of its stock of low-cost residential hotels; from 1970 to
1986, Portland, Oregon lost 59% of its residential hotels; and from 1971 to 1981 Denver lost 64% of its SRO hotels (Wright and Rubin, 1997). Thus the destruction of SRO housing is a major factor in the growth of homelessness in many cities.

Finally, it should be noted that the largest federal housing assistance program is the entitlement to deduct mortgage interest from income for tax purposes. In fact, for every one dollar spent on low income housing programs, the federal treasury loses four dollars to housing-related tax expenditures, 75% of which benefit households in the top fifth of income distribution (Dolbeare, 1996). In 2003, the federal government spent almost twice as much in housing-related tax expenditures and direct housing assistance for households in the top income quintile than on housing subsidies for the lowest-income households (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2005). Thus, federal housing policy has not responded to the needs of low-income households, while disproportionately benefiting the wealthiest Americans.

OTHER FACTORS

Particularly within the context of poverty and the lack of affordable housing, certain additional factors may push people into homelessness. Other major factors, which can contribute to homelessness, include the following:

Lack of Affordable Health Care: For families and individuals struggling to pay the rent, a serious illness or disability can start a downward spiral into homelessness, beginning with a lost job, depletion of savings to pay for care, and eventual eviction. 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.

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).

Mental Illness: Approximately 22% of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of severe and persistent mental illness (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). Despite the disproportionate number of severely mentally ill people among the homeless population, increases in homelessness are not attributable to the release of severely mentally ill people from institutions. Most patients were released from mental hospitals in the 1950s and 1960s, yet vast increases in homelessness did not occur until the 1980s, when incomes and housing options for those living on the margins began to diminish rapidly. According to the 2003 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Report, most homeless persons with mental illness do not need to be institutionalized, but can
live in the community with the appropriate supportive housing options (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2003). However, many mentally ill homeless people are unable to obtain access to supportive housing and/or other treatment services. The mental health support services most needed include case management, housing, and treatment.

Addiction Disorders: The relationship between addiction and homelessness is complex and controversial. While rates of alcohol and drug abuse are disproportionately high among the homeless population, the increase in homelessness over the past two decades cannot be explained by addiction alone. Many people who are addicted to alcohol and drugs never become homeless, but people who are poor and addicted are clearly at increased risk of homelessness. During the 1980s, competition for increasingly scarce low-income housing grew so intense that those with disabilities such as addiction and mental illness were more likely to lose out and find themselves on the streets. The loss of SRO housing, a source of stability for many poor people suffering from addiction and/or mental illness, was a major factor in increased homelessness in many communities.

Addiction does increase the risk of displacement for the precariously housed; in the absence of appropriate treatment, it may doom one's chances of getting housing once on the streets. Homeless people often face insurmountable barriers to obtaining health care, including addictive disorder treatment services and recovery supports. The following are among the obstacles to treatment for homeless persons: lack of health insurance; lack of documentation; waiting lists; scheduling difficulties; daily contact requirements; lack of transportation; ineffective treatment methods; lack of supportive services; and cultural insensitivity. An in-depth study of 13 communities across the nation revealed service gaps in every community in at least one stage of the treatment and recovery continuum for homeless people (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1998).

CONCLUSION

Homelessness results from a complex set of circumstances that require people to choose between food, shelter, and other basic needs. Only a concerted effort to ensure jobs that pay a living wage, adequate support for those who cannot work, affordable housing, and access to health care will bring an end to homelessness.

FOOTNOTES

1. 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. 2. The poverty line for a family of three is $12,750; for a family of four, the poverty line is $16,813. See http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty.html for details. 3. "Worst case needs" refers to those renters with incomes below 50% of the area median income who are involuntarily displaced, pay more than half of their income for rent and utilities, or live in
substandard housing. 4. The Section 8 Program is a federal housing assistance program that provides housing subsidies for families and individuals to live in existing rental housing or in designated housing projects.

REFERENCES


Department of Housing and Urban Development, Office of Policy Development and Research. Waiting In Vain: An Update On America's Housing Crisis, 1999. Available for $5.00 from HUD User, P.O. Box 6091, Rockville, MD 20849-6091, 800/245-2691, or free from the HUD User web site at www.huduser.org


Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, Administration’s Section 8 Voucher Proposal Closes National Low Income Housing Coalition.
How Many People Experience Homelessness?

NCH Fact Sheet #2

Published by the National Coalition for the Homeless, June 2006

Many people call or write the National Coalition for the Homeless to ask about the number of homeless people in the United States. There is no easy answer to this question and, in fact, the question itself is misleading. In most cases, homelessness is a temporary circumstance -- not a permanent condition. A more appropriate measure of the magnitude of homelessness is the number of people who experience homelessness over time, not the number of "homeless people."

Studies of homelessness are complicated by problems of definitions and methodology. This fact sheet describes definitions of homelessness, methodologies for counting homeless people, recent estimates of homelessness, and estimates of the increase in homelessness over the past two decades. Additional resources for further study are also provided.

DEFINITIONS

As a result of methodological and financial constraints, most studies are limited to counting people who are in shelters or on the streets. While this approach may yield useful information about the number of people who use services such as shelters and soup kitchens, or who are easy to locate on the street, it can result in underestimates of homelessness. Many people who lack a stable, permanent residence have few shelter options because shelters are filled to capacity or are unavailable. A recent study of 24 U.S. cities found that in 2005, 14% of all requests for emergency shelter went unmet due to lack of resources. For families, the numbers are even worse: 32% of emergency shelter requests from families were denied (U.S. Conference of Mayors, 2005). In addition, a review of homelessness in 50 cities found that in virtually every city, the city's official estimated number of homeless people greatly exceeded the number of emergency shelter and transitional housing spaces (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004). Moreover, there are few or no shelters in rural areas of the United States, despite significant levels of homelessness (Brown, 2002). As a result of these and other factors, many people in homeless situations are forced to live with relatives and friends in crowded, temporary arrangements. People in these situations are experiencing homelessness, but are less likely to be counted. For instance, of the children and youth identified as homeless by the Department of
Education in FY2000, only 35% lived in shelters; 34% lived doubled-up with family or friends, and 23% lived in motels and other locations. Yet, these children and youth may not immediately be recognized as homeless and are sometimes denied access to shelter or the protections and services of the McKinney-Vento Act (U.S. Department of Education).

**METHODOLOGY**

Researchers use different methods to measure homelessness. One method attempts to count all the people who are literally homeless on a given day or during a given week (point-in-time counts). A second method of counting homeless people examines the number of people who are homeless over a given period of time (period prevalence counts).

Choosing between point-in-time counts and period-prevalence counts has significant implications for understanding the magnitude and dynamics of homelessness. The high turnover in the homeless population documented by recent studies (see below) suggests that many more people experience homelessness than previously thought and that most of these people do not remain homeless. Because point-in-time studies give just a "snapshot" picture of homelessness, they only count those who are homeless at a particular time. Over time, however, some people will find housing and escape homelessness while new people will lose housing and become homeless. Systemic social and economic factors (prolonged unemployment or sudden loss of a job, lack of affordable housing, domestic violence, etc.) are frequently responsible for these episodes of homelessness. Point-in-time studies do not accurately identify these intermittently homeless people, and therefore tend to overestimate the proportion of people who are so-called "chronically homeless" -- particularly those who suffer from severe mental illness and/or addiction disorders and therefore have a much harder time escaping homelessness and finding permanent housing. For these reasons, point-in-time counts are often criticized as misrepresenting the magnitude and nature of homelessness.

There is another important methodological issue that should be considered. Regardless of the time period over which the study was conducted, many people will not be counted because they are not in places researchers can easily find. This group of people, often referred to as "the unsheltered" or "hidden" homeless, frequently stay in automobiles, camp grounds, or other places that researchers cannot effectively search. For instance, a national study of formerly homeless people found that the most common places people who had been literally homeless stayed were vehicles (59.2%) and makeshift housing, such as tents, boxes, caves, or boxcars (24.6%) (Link et al., 1995). This suggests that homeless counts may miss significant numbers of people who are homeless, including those living in doubled-up situations.
NATIONAL ESTIMATES OF HOMELESSNESS

There are several national estimates of homelessness. Many are dated, or based on dated information. For all of the reasons discussed above, none of these estimates is the definitive representation of "how many people are homeless." The best approximation is from a study done by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty which states that approximately 3.5 million people, 1.35 million of them children, are likely to experience homelessness in a given year (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2004).

These numbers, based on findings from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, Urban Institute and specifically the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers, draw their estimates from a study of service providers across the country at two different times of the year in 1996. They found that, on a given night in October, 444,000 people (in 346,000 households) experienced homelessness – which translates to 6.3% of the population of people living in poverty. On a given night in February, 842,000 (in 637,000 households) experienced homelessness – which translates to almost 10% of the population of people living in poverty. Converting these estimates into an annual projection, the numbers that emerge are 2.3 million people (based on the October estimate) and 3.5 million people (based on the February estimate). This translates to approximately 1% of the U.S. population experiencing homelessness each year, 38% (October) to 39% (February) of them being children (Urban Institute 2000).

It is also important to note that this study was based on a national survey of service providers. Since not all people experiencing homelessness utilize service providers, the actual numbers of people experiencing homelessness are likely higher than those found in the study, Thus, we are estimating on the high end of the study’s numbers: 3.5 million people, 39% of which are children (Urban Institute 2000).

IS HOMELESSNESS INCREASING?

One limited measure of the growth in homelessness is the increase in the number of shelter beds over time. A 1991 study examined homelessness "rates" (the number of shelter beds in a city divided by the city's population) in 182 U.S. cities with populations over 100,000. The study found that homelessness rates tripled between 1981 and 1989 for the 182 cities as a group (Burt, 1997).

A 1997 review of research conducted over the past decade (1987-1997) in 11 communities and 4 states found that shelter capacity more than doubled in 9 communities and 3 states during that time period (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1997). In two communities and two states, shelter capacity tripled over the decade. These numbers are useful for measuring the growth in demand for shelter beds (and the resources made available to respond to that growth) over time. They indicate a dramatic increase in homelessness in the United States over the past two decades.
CONCLUSION

By its very nature, homelessness is impossible to measure with 100% accuracy. More important than knowing the precise number of people who experience homelessness is our progress in ending it. Recent studies suggest that the United States generates homelessness at a much higher rate than previously thought. Our task in ending homelessness is thus more important now than ever.

REFERENCES


Brown, Leslie. "On the Outside", in News and Record (April 7th, 2002).


Who is Homeless?

NCH Fact Sheet #3

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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." 42 U.S.C. § 11302(a) 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).
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 43% 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 (Visser, 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 factsheet 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
PERSONS WITH MENTAL ILLNESS

Approximately 22% 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 factsheet 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 Rent1 (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 15% 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.

RESOURCES


