

Homelessness—Causes and Solutions

Data on Homelessness

Different definitions of homelessness are used in different contexts. Generally, homelessness is defined as a person who "lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate night-time residence." According to HUD's definition, a person who is "chronically homeless" is an unaccompanied homeless individual with a disabling condition (e.g., substance abuse, serious mental illness, developmental disability, or chronic physical illness) who has either been continuously homeless for a year or more, or has had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. In order to be considered chronically homeless, a person must have been sleeping in a place not meant for human habitation and/or in an emergency homeless shelter.

According to a recent study by The National Alliance to End Homelessness, Alaska, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Nevada, Oregon, Rhode Island, Washington State, and Washington, D.C. have the highest rates of homelessness.

The top four causes of homelessness among unaccompanied individuals are (1) lack of affordable housing, (2) unemployment, (3) poverty, (4) mental illness and the lack of needed services, and (5) substance abuse and the lack of needed services

People who are homeless frequently report health problems.

- 38% report alcohol use problems
- 26% report other drug use problems
- 39% report some form of mental health problems
- 66% report either substance use and/or mental health problems
- 3% report having HIV/AIDS
- 26% report other acute health problems such as tuberculosis, pneumonia, or STDs
- 46% report chronic health conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or cancer

But what is the true state of homelessness in the U.S.? Here are 10 facts about homelessness in America:

1. Although homelessness increased slightly—by 0.3%—between 2017 and 2018, it's been on a general downward trend for the past decade, according to the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](#). In 2018, about 553,000 people were homeless for at least one night, according to the nonprofit organization. Between 2007 and 2012, an average of 630,000 people experienced homelessness per year.

2. Half of all people experiencing homelessness in 2018 were in one of five states, according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development: California (24%),

New York (17%), Florida (6%), Texas (5%) and Washington (4%). Of the country's urban areas that include a major city, New York, Los Angeles/Los Angeles County and Seattle/King County had the most homeless people.

3. African Americans represent 13% of the U.S. population but 40% of all people experiencing homelessness and 51% of individuals who are homeless with children, according to HUD.

4. In January 2018, 38,000 veterans faced homelessness on a given night – half the number than in 2010. The rate of overall homelessness has also dropped significantly, by 13% over that same time period.

5. Males are more likely than women to be homeless in the U.S.— 60% of homeless people were males in 2018, according to HUD.

Possible Solutions

The United States Interagency Council on Homelessness identifies a few major components that are needed for a solution: housing, health care, jobs, education, crisis response, criminal justice reform, and collaborative leadership. The key is to focus on those solutions that offer the most cost effective way to lower homelessness.

Since modern homelessness began more than thirty years ago, research and experience have overwhelmingly shown that investments in permanent housing are extraordinarily effective in reducing homelessness—as well as being cost-effective.

Many of the most successful housing-based policies designed to address the homelessness crisis—in particular, permanent supportive housing for individuals living with disabilities and other special needs—were pioneered in New York City and have been replicated throughout the country. Numerous research studies have consistently confirmed that long-term housing assistance not only successfully reduces homelessness—it is also less expensive than shelter and other institutional care. Proven housing-based policies include:

Federal housing assistance: Federal housing programs are one of the most successful housing-based solutions to reduce homelessness. The two largest federal housing programs are public housing and federal housing vouchers, known as Housing Choice Vouchers or Section 8 vouchers. Housing vouchers allow low-income households to rent modest market-rate housing of their choice and provide a flexible subsidy that adjusts with the family's income over time. Studies show that public housing and federal housing vouchers are highly successful at reducing family homelessness and in ensuring that these families remain stably housed out of the shelter system.

Permanent supportive housing: Pioneered in New York City in the 1980s, permanent supportive housing has now proven to be a successful and cost-effective solution to the homelessness crisis. The supportive housing model combines affordable housing assistance with vital support services for individuals living with mental illness, HIV/AIDS

or other serious health problems. Moreover, numerous research studies have shown that permanent supportive housing costs less than other forms of emergency and institutional care. The landmark 1990 City-State "New York/New York Agreement," which has been renewed twice, is the premier example of a permanent supportive housing initiative that successfully reduced homelessness in New York City and saved taxpayer dollars that would otherwise have been spent on costly shelters and hospitalizations.

"Housing first": The housing first approach to street homelessness builds on the success of permanent supportive housing. The "housing first" approach involves moving long-term street homeless individuals — the majority of whom are living with mental illness, substance abuse disorders and other serious health problems — directly into subsidized housing and then linking them to support services, either on-site or in the community. Research studies have found that the majority of long-term street homeless people moved into "housing first" apartments remain stably housed and experience significant improvements in their health problems. Much like permanent supportive housing, the "housing first" approach is far less costly than emergency and institutional care, such as shelters, hospitals and correctional facilities.

A fundamental cause of current homelessness is the widening housing affordability gap. In New York City, San Francisco and many other major urban centers that gap has widened significantly over the past decades, causing the loss of hundreds of thousands of units of affordable rental housing. At the same time that housing affordability has worsened, government at every level has cut back on already-inadequate housing assistance for low-income people and has reduced investments in building and preserving affordable housing. To address the wide housing affordability gap, the Federal, State and City governments must significantly increase investments in affordable rental housing, with a significant portion targeted to homeless families and individuals.

Through housing-first, Utah reduced its chronically-homeless population 72 percent between 2005 and 2014. Just having a roof over their head, a permanent address, and a place to prepare food and store belongings made so much of a difference for people that the director of the state's Housing and Community Development Division told the *Washington Post* that the number of chronically homeless was "approaching a functional zero."