

# Homelessness: Knowledge At Work

## Unit 2: Behind the Numbers: Who is Homeless & Why?

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### Handout 1: Overview

Homelessness does not describe a type of person, but a housing situation. In other words, it is a **state**, not a **trait**.

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#### By The Numbers

Two strategies are used to estimate the size of the homeless population:

**1. Point in Time Count**—counts individuals who are on the street, in shelters, jails, and other facilities on a single night or over the course of a week.

**2. Period Prevalence Count**—estimates how many people are homeless over the course of a year, or over the course of their lifetimes.

Point in time counts take a snapshot of how many people are homeless at any given time. For example, HUD's Annual Homeless Assessment Report (HUD, 2009) compiles point in time counts from around the country. The report documented 664,414 Americans homeless on one night.

The HUD report also documents the number of people who accessed shelter and transitional housing programs over the course of a year: 1.6 Million Americans.

Over the course of their lifetimes, many people experience homelessness. According to one estimate, more than 13.5 million Americans spend at least one night homeless during their lives (Link, 1994).

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#### Root Causes

Homelessness is caused by structural factors (the number of musical chairs).

Those who become homeless (or who are left standing when the music stops) typically have fewer economic and social buffers.

#### Structural factors that cause homelessness include:

- Housing supply and demand
- The gap between income and the cost of housing
- Number of housing subsidies
- Increasing poverty levels

(Bassuk et al., 1997)

#### Risk Factors for Homelessness Include:

- Lack of income/economic resources
- Fragmented social supports and family conflict
- Minority status
- Family conflict
- Drug and alcohol use
- Serious mental health issues

(Bassuk et al., 1997; Bassuk et al., 1996)

Economic recessions make the income part of the equation worse, pushing more people over the edge into homelessness. The recession of 2008-2009, combined with the housing foreclosure crisis, may drive as many as 1.5 million people into homelessness (NAEH, 2009).

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### Handout 1: Overview (cont.)

#### Who Becomes Homeless?

There is no such thing as a “typical homeless person.” Everyone is unique. People experiencing homelessness share a spectrum of human traits, behaviors, and emotions, just like any other group of people.

The ranks of people experiencing homelessness include single adults, families with children, and unaccompanied youth.

Minorities are more likely to be homeless.

#### According to HUD:

- **26%** of the homeless population has mental health issues.
- **37%** have chronic drug and alcohol problems.
- **50%** of homeless individuals diagnosed with a mental illness also experience substance use problems—typically called “co-occurring disorders.”

(AHAR, 2009, US Mayors, 2008, NAMI, 2003)

Many homeless adults are veterans. 131,000 veterans are homeless on any given night and up to 260,000 throughout the year. That’s 3 times the number of U.S. troops deployed in Afghanistan at the end of 2009 (NCHV, 2009).

The very young are also particularly vulnerable to becoming homeless. It is estimated that up to 1.5 million of the overall homeless population are children (NCFH, 2009). That is 1 in every 50 children in the US, or the populations of Boston, Seattle, and St. Louis... **combined.**

People who become homeless are first and foremost “people.” They are bigger than the labels that are used to describe them.

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## Handout Two: Recommended Reading

### **Homelessness In Female-Headed Families: Childhood And Adult Risk And Protective Factors. American Journal of Public Health. Vol. 87. No. 2.**

Bassuk, Ellen L., MD, Buckner, John C., PhD, Weinreb, Linda F., MD, Browne, Angela, PhD, Bassuk, Shari S., Dawson, Ree, PhD, and Perloff, Jennifer N., MPA. (1997).

### **People Who Experience Long-Term Homelessness: Characteristics and Interventions. Towards Under Standing Homelessness: 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research.**

Caton, Carol L. M., PhD, Wilkins, Carol, MPP, Anderson, Jacquelyn, MPP. Washington, DC. Retrieved from: <http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/caton/>. December 18, 2009.

### **America's Youngest Outcasts.**

National Center on Family Homelessness (2009)  
Newton Centre, MA Retrieved from: <http://www.homelesschildrenamerica.org/findings.php>.  
December 16, 2009.

### **Lifetime and Five-Year Prevalence of Homelessness in the United States. Vol. 84, No. 12.**

Link, Bruce G., Susser, Ezra, Stueve, Ann, Phelan, Jo, Moore, Robert E., and Struening, Elmer (1994). American Journal of Public Health. US Department of Housing and Urban Development. (2009) The 2008 Annual Homeless Assessment Report. Washington, DC.  
[www.hudhre.info/documents/4thHomelessAssessmentReport.pdf](http://www.hudhre.info/documents/4thHomelessAssessmentReport.pdf)

### **A Guide to Counting Unsheltered Homeless People 2nd revision.**

US Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2008.  
Retrieved from: [www.hudhre.info/documents/counting\\_unsheltered.pdf](http://www.hudhre.info/documents/counting_unsheltered.pdf).  
December 16, 2009.