

What is homelessness? Why do we care?

There is no universal definition of homelessness because it is not easily defined. The National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH) defines homelessness in these ways:

- People are at-risk for homelessness when their housing is unaffordable, unsafe, overcrowded, insecure, inappropriate, or poorly maintained, and when they lack the support necessary to maintain stability in their lives.
- People experience hidden homelessness when they are living in temporary accommodations such as with family or friends.
- People experience absolute homelessness when they are staying in emergency shelters or sleeping in places not intended for living (e.g. cars, on the streets, under bridges). (Beyond these definitions for homelessness, the NCH identifies three types of absolute homelessness, which are outlined on page 2.)

Reasons for Homelessness

There are many different reasons why someone may experience homelessness:

- 1. Poverty:** The U.S. measures poverty by comparing a person's or family's income to a set poverty threshold or minimum amount of income needed to cover basic needs. People whose income falls under that threshold are considered poor. The poverty rate in the U.S. is 12.3% based on the 2017 Census. There were 39.7 million people living in poverty. Multiple factors contribute to the continuation of poverty, including lack of employment opportunities and the decline in the availability of public assistance.
- 2. Housing:** A lack of affordable housing and the limited scale of housing assistance programs have contributed to the current housing crisis and to homelessness. Recently, foreclosures have also increased the number of people who experience homelessness.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition estimates that the 2017 Housing Wage is \$21.21 per hour, exceeding the \$16.38 hourly wage earned by the average renter by almost \$5.00 an hour, and greatly exceeding wages earned by low income renter households. In fact, the hourly wage needed for renters hoping to afford a two-bedroom rental home is \$13.96 higher than the national minimum wage of \$7.25.
- 3. Mental illness:** Approximately 25% of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of severe and persistent mental illness (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2015).
- 4. Domestic violence:** Battered women who live in poverty are often forced to choose between abusive relationships and homelessness. 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).
- 5. Addiction:** The relationship between addiction and homelessness is complex and controversial. 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.
- 6. Lack of affordable healthcare:** 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.

Homelessness in Nashville

Most data published on homelessness is based on something called the Place in Time (PIT) count. This is an annual count of homeless individuals and families utilizing services taken on the coldest day of the year in January 2020.

TOTAL HOMELESS PEOPLE 2,016

Sheltered..... 1,432
Unsheltered584

TOTAL CHRONIC POPULATION 533

Sheltered Single.....337
Unsheltered Singles..... 196

TOTAL FAMILIES POPULATION..... 55

Sheltered Families..... 54
Unsheltered Families 1

TOTAL VETERAN POPULATION ... 249

Sheltered Veterans 178
Unsheltered Veterans.....71

UNACCOMPANIED YOUTH (18-24) 71

Sheltered54
Unsheltered 17



Types of Absolute Homelessness

Chronic homelessness: Individuals experiencing chronic homelessness are generally what most think of when people think of homeless individuals. The chronically homeless are those for whom shelter systems and homeless resources have become a way of life. The shelter system has become a long-term housing arrangement rather than an emergency option. HUD identifies these individuals as those with a disabling condition who have either experienced homelessness for a year or resided in a place not meant for human habitation (e.g. car, campsite, etc.).

Transitional homelessness: Individuals experiencing transitional homelessness are generally those who will use the shelter system for a short amount of time in-between places of stable housing. Transitional homelessness can be caused by catastrophic events like natural disasters or house fires, or can be caused other unforeseen causes of displacement.

Episodic homelessness: Individuals experiencing episodic homelessness are generally those who transition in and out of homelessness. Episodic homelessness is usually caused by chronic unemployment or medical, mental health, and substance abuse challenges.

Why should 7th - 9th graders learn about homelessness?

- Prepares students for encountering social issues in the future.
- Instills the value of citizenship.
- Breaks down stereotypes and fear of those who are different from them.
- Sensitizes students to be more accepting of those in their school or other circles that may be experiencing homelessness.

Goals for 7th - 9th graders learning about homelessness?

- Provide language to discuss social issues including homelessness.
- Create a basic understanding factors contributing to homelessness.
- Provide tangible means for students to contribute to the cause of ending homelessness.

