

Battling Homelessness

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The Statistics:

According to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development, someone who is homeless is defined as “a person who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence.” The National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty estimates that each year at least 2.5 to 3.5 million Americans sleep in shelters, transitional housing, and public places not meant for human habitation. At the last point-in-time estimate, taken in January of 2016, for the Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress, there were 549,928 people experiencing homelessness in the United States. Their annual point-in-time count offers a snapshot of homelessness on a single day of the year, but the annual number of those experiencing homelessness could be three to six times as high. In January 2016, about 22 percent, or 120,819, of those experiencing homelessness were less than 18 years of age, and 40 percent (217,268 people) were women. According to the Planning Council in Norfolk, Virginia, on any one day, there are around 1,400 people identified as homeless in South Hampton Roads. Throughout the year, there may be two to three times that number who present for services in the community. The Virginia Department of Education collects data from local school districts on the number of students who experience homelessness during a school year. In the 2012-2013 school year, there were 1,548 public school students reported as homeless in South Hampton Roads.

Causes and Consequences:

The leading causes of homelessness in the United States are insufficient income and lack of affordable housing. In 2008, after the foreclosure crisis began, state and local homeless groups reported a 61 percent rise in homelessness. The Union Mission, a service organization serving the homeless in Hampton Roads, thinks that the face of homelessness has evolved over the last decade. They estimate that 40 percent of homeless people in large metropolitan areas are families, and these families typically consist of a single mom with children. One of the leading causes of homelessness for woman is domestic violence. Among homeless families, over 40 percent are homeless due to domestic violence. About 92 percent of homeless women have experienced severe physical or sexual abuse in their lives and 63 percent were victims of domestic violence. Survivors of domestic violence are often isolated from support networks and financial resources by their abusers. This can result in a lack of steady income, employment history, credit history, and landlord references. At least half of homeless women are employed or employable, but do not earn enough money to support themselves and their children. This leads homeless families to need assistance with housing, employment, childcare, school enrollment, transportation, recreation, and parenting. Without external resources and shelters, it is harder to recover and escape chronic homelessness. Only about half of homeless woman had some sort of prenatal visit in the first trimester of their pregnancy, compared to 85 percent of the general population, and approximately one-fifth of homeless women report drug and alcohol abuse during pregnancy. Lack of prenatal care along with substance abuse negatively impacts a baby's health. The resources and care a homeless mother receives has a profound impact on a newborn's life.

Children and youth who are homeless also tend to experience hunger, poor physical and mental health, as well as missed education opportunities. Homeless children suffer from both acute and chronic illnesses at twice the rate of the general ambulatory population. Around 97 percent of homeless children have moved at least once on an annual basis, disrupting their education and potential for academic achievement. Hunger, something homeless children are twice as likely to experience than those with a home, has negative effects on

the physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development of children. Roughly two-thirds of the adults experiencing homelessness never received a high school diploma or a completed GED. According to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, children and youth report that school is a home to them. In school, students have the opportunity to gain the skills and support needed to avoid poverty and chronic homelessness as adults.

Homeless individuals experience three to six times the rates of serious injury and illness as the general population. They experience increased risks and severity of upper respiratory infections, heart disease, hypertension, gastrointestinal problems, and HIV/AIDS. Proper nutrition and access to balanced, nutritional, meals could help curb the prevalence of many of these issues in the homeless population. Educational and networking resources could aid them in the career steps necessary to escape chronic homelessness, and provide access to a better, more balanced, life.

References and Sources of Additional Information:

http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/domestic_violence

<https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/2016-AHAR-Part-1.pdf>

<http://www.theplanningcouncil.org/homeless-solutions/>

<http://www.theplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Homelessness.pdf>

<http://www.endhomelessness.org/page/-/files/Rapid%20Re-Housing%20with%20DV%20Survivors--Approaches%20that%20Work.pdf>

<http://www.naehcy.org/about-naehcy/welcome>

<https://www.unionmissionministries.org/learn/about-homelessness/>

<http://www.theplanningcouncil.org/homeless-solutions/>

<http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/faqs>

<http://www.apa.org/pi/families/poverty.aspx>

<http://www.icphusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Effects-of-Homelessness.pdf>