

## *The Ray Society @ Drake University*

### **HOMELESSNESS: IN AMERICA and in IOWA:**

**HOMELESSNESS:** first emerged as a public issue in the 1870's. Today, a century and a half later, homelessness is a serious and florid problem throughout much of the world, including the U.S. and Iowa. This paper is designed to provide the student with a broad, but highly condensed understanding of the issues surrounding this societal crisis.

**DEFINING and CLASSIFYING the Men, Women and Children Who are HOMELESS:** Because a person can be homeless one day and not the next, homelessness may be the quintessential moving target. Among countless attempts to define *homelessness*, “Living in a place not intended for human habitation” is a popular version. Another is “lack of a fixed, regular, adequate nighttime residence.” Venturing beyond the generic, the UK homelessness charity *Crisis* describes “a home is not just a physical place: it also provides roots, identity, security, a sense of belonging, and a place of emotional well being.” In the UK, homelessness is also described as “those who are *roofless*.”

Among the classifications of homelessness, *Chronic Homelessness* represents an evolving and continuing problem for society. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines chronic homelessness as “Having a disability and having been homeless for the past year” or, “Having a disability and having experienced at least 4 episodes of homelessness in the past 3 years, totaling at least 12 months.”

**DATA SOURCES:** Worldwide efforts to collect reasonably accurate data on homelessness are rife with vicissitudes. For our purposes, 2007 was the first year HUD began collecting data. In the US, HUD's “Point-In-Time-Count” is the only “official” survey of homelessness. A Point-in-Time (PIT) Count is an annual HUD effort, conducted in January, to estimate the number of Americans, including veterans, the chronically homeless, and children and youth, without safe, stable housing. PIT counts help to establish the dimensions of the problem and help policy makers track progress toward the goal of ending homelessness. State specific surveys include an inventory of available homeless services, shelters and housing.

**HOW SERIOUS and COSTLY is the PROBLEM of HOMELESSNES?:** We are all familiar with the myriad television and media reports demonstrating the blight of homelessness, particularly those featuring photos and film showing the campsites in cities like L.A., San Francisco, and New York City. Locally, the DM Register and City View Magazine, among others, have featured several such stories. Social signals include:

In 2018, the National Coalition to End Homelessness estimated that between 552,000 and 640,000 Americans are homeless on any given night.

In 2014, the USC School of Public Policy conducted a survey of 1,000 likely voters, asking the question “What is the single biggest problem in California.” The overwhelming majority did not answer immigration, terrorism, taxes, or climate change; they answered “homelessness.”

Dr. Ben Carson, MD, Secretary of HUD: “*Homelessness in California is at a crisis level*” and “*The cost of housing is extremely high.*”

Most homeless people utilize a variety of public services such as hospital emergency wards, ambulances, food banks, law enforcement services, taxpayer funded meals, publicly funded drug and alcohol abuse treatment facilities, jail bookings, etc. A 2015 study conducted in Philadelphia estimated the cost of sustaining a single homeless person for one year at \$22,372. When multiplied by HUD's estimate of 568,000 homeless in America, we arrive at a figure that most would define as “serious”: \$12,707,296,000. (\$ BILLION)

In 2006, New Yorker magazine published “Million-Dollar Murray”, a story by Malcom Gladwell that followed the life of a Reno, Nevada-based man named Murray Barr. A Marine veteran who fell on hard times, Murray depended on various publicly funded services for many years. The cost to society over 10 years of Murray's life was estimated to be \$1 million dollars.

In Washington: “Seattle and King County have been in an official “state of emergency” since 2015.”

In San Francisco: “The City By the Bay has more billionaires per capita than any other place on earth, but it's homeless problems rival many third-world countries. The misery of homelessness, mental illness and drug addiction hits deep in SF, and has turned parts of this beautiful city into a public toilet.” In SF, there are an estimated 5,200 unsheltered people on the streets on any given night. A Fox News report on August 20, 2019 summarized a federally mandated count of SF homeless, showing a 17% increase over the past 2 years, primarily due to the growing number of people living in cars, RVs and similar vehicles.

In Iowa: In 2019, Hope Ministries received over 1000 calls from homeless women, many with children in tow.

**DEMOGRAPHICS: WHO ARE the HOMELESS?:** The data reflect some variance, depending on location and the year of the survey. For instance, the number of homeless in Florida will vary considerably depending how severe the winter is “up north.” In general, the next time you notice a homeless person they are likely to be:

Male: 67% of the single homeless population are men.

Single Women: 15%

Women with children: 12.2% (Married; usually separated)

Members of a family with children: 33%

Under age 25: 7%

Chronically Homeless: 18%

Veterans: 7% (HUD) – 13% (National Alliance to End Homelessness) 90% are male - 2.1% down from 2018

Caucasian: 49%

Hispanic: Represent 16% of the population but 22% of the homeless

Blacks: Represent 13% of the population but 26% of those living in poverty and 40% of the homeless. Of 'homeless families with children', 52% are African American.  
 Mental Illness: 10%-20% carry a dual diagnosis; a combination of mental illness and substance abuse.  
 Live in California: 36%

### **STATES and CITIES with the HIGHEST RATE of HOMELESSNESS: (2018 Data)**

Washington, NY, Calif, Tex and Fla account for over half of U.S. homelessness.

California: 129,972 (approximately 85% are unsheltered, a factor related, in part, to warm weather)  
 New York: 91,987  
 Florida: 31,030 (more than 80% are unsheltered)  
 Texas: 25,310  
 Washington: 22,304  
 Mass: 20,068  
 Oregon: 14,476  
 Penn: 13,512  
 Colorado: 10,857  
 Illinois: 10,643

Los Angeles: 41,290 homeless; a 13,6% increase over 2019. L.A. Has the overall highest level of Veterans who are homeless, and the highest number of homeless youth.

New York City: 78,676 Homeless in April, 2019, or about 14% of the nation's Homeless population: with approximately 74,982 living in shelters and 3,622 residing in tents, other outdoor facilities, or sleeping on the sidewalks.

Nationwide, homelessness service providers, on most nights, are able to accommodate about 70% of those in need. Severe winter nights reduce capacity temporarily. Providers house about 1.44 million men, women, and youth annually. An estimated 200,000 Americans live outside year-round.

### **HOMELESSNESS IN IOWA AND IN DES MOINES:**

In January, 2019, of the 568,000 nationwide, approximately 2,749 Iowans are homeless on any given night, with an additional 1,918 “at risk.” If those that are “doubled up” are added to the picture, the estimate soars to more than 12,000.

Joppa estimates 632 homeless in Des Moines. An estimated 250-300 live outside year-round. 44% of the state's homeless reside in Polk County. Recent studies reveal 270 chronically homeless, and at least 296 veterans.

In 2019, Des Moines Public Schools listed 104 students with nighttime residence of “unsheltered”, usually meaning sleeping in a tent, in cars or other vehicles, or as “guests” in the homes of friends or associates. Des Moines has 12 homeless shelters.

**TRENDING:** When charting trends, which are based upon statistics, perusal is in order. According to HUD, since 2007 overall homelessness has decreased by 155%. While that is certainly encouraging,

the trend does not include people who are “doubled up,” a term describing those who have no home, but reside with others; frequently friends or family members. In fact, the majority of women and mothers with children fall into this category. If the definition of 'homeless' is expanded to include this category, the decrease would be far less encouraging.

**Data for Recent Years:** paints a different picture. Twelve states and the District of Columbia have experienced an increase in homelessness: Iowa by approximately 3% and South Dakota by 100%. Seattle has reported a 28% increase between 2017 and 2018. North Dakota is riding a 236% increase in homelessness since 2008, thought to be related to the thousands of people following the oil (fracking) industry. A December 2019 HUD study revealed a “significant” increase in unsheltered and chronically homelessness on the west coast: California (by 16.4%), Oregon and Washington. Recent increases have been so dramatic that they offset the nationwide decrease, resulting in an overall increase of 2.75%.

**COVID-19:** Any study of the homeless would be remiss if it did not include consideration of the era of the novel coronavirus. While numbers, at this point in time, are speculative at best, every source we explored anticipated a meaningful increase in homelessness linked to the pandemic. At the time of this study, the U.S. unemployment rate was 11.3% ; down from 14.7% that the Wall Street Journal described as “the worst since the Great Depression.” Sustained periods of high unemployment inevitably lead to increased homelessness.

While data on the number of homeless who have contracted COVID-19 is sparse, there is an interesting development. In May, 2020, 600 homeless in Boston tested positive, with only 2 deaths. Shortly thereafter, 397 residents of Boston's Pine Tree Inn were tested. 146 (36%) tested positive, but not one was symptomatic. Scientists with an interest in herd immunity continue to explore this finding.

**CAUSATION:** Hundreds of books and millions of words have been dedicated to identifying the many causes of homelessness. One source ([acasestudy.com/poverty-homelessness](https://acasestudy.com/poverty-homelessness)) concludes that most homelessness can be traced to:

**Poverty:** “Homelessness and poverty are inextricably linked.” In 2016, 12.7% of the U.S. population was living in poverty. In 2019, the number rose to 13.1 %. That translates to approximately 42 million people who are, with a dose of bad luck, within a few weeks of becoming homeless. An illness, the loss of a job, an uninsured accident can lead to homelessness.

**Public Policy and Affordable Housing:** The cost of rent has steadily increased, while anti-poverty programs like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families and food stamps (SNAP) have been slashed. The PPC (Poor People's Campaign), working with the Institute for Policy Studies, the Kairos Center, and “Repairers of the Breach”, found a link between cuts in federal housing assistance since the Seventies and growing homelessness. A 2019 report by the Department of Commerce concluded: “after examining potential drivers of the upward trend, it appears the increase is overwhelmingly caused by growing rents, pushing people living at the margins into homelessness.” Lack of affordable housing and the limited scale of housing assistance programs ranks second only to poverty as a cause of homelessness. One example:

A 2018 study by HUD revealed that in San Francisco, a family of four making \$117,422 annually qualifies as “low income.” Data from the California Association of Realtors indicates that only 17% of

households can afford a median-priced home. In SF, “median priced” means \$1.7 million dollars. In The City By the Bay, there are an estimated 5,200 unsheltered people on any given night.

**Relationships / Divorce:** A multitude of studies and surveys has revealed a factor that many sociologists and homeless providers found surprising: When asked “what happened that caused your homelessness”, “relationship breakdown” or “divorce” is the most frequently cited reason.

**Mental Health:** Clinicians who care for the homeless today usually conclude that at least one third of their patients suffer from severe mental disorders. Once again, public policy plays a critical role. One study summarized its findings as “In the 1980's, Ronald Reagan closed California's mental health institutions, releasing thousands of mentally unstable patients to the streets.” Peggy Huppert, executive director of the National Alliance of Mental Illness (NAMI), in her July 14<sup>th</sup> Des Moines Register article “Overhaul Worthless Without Funding”, pointed out that deinstitutionalization was actually begun by President John F. Kennedy in 1963. Kennedy's dream of a robust, community-based mental health system was never fully realized, “resulting in widespread, chronic homelessness in urban centers and the criminalization of mental illness.” Numerous studies and surveys came to similar conclusions; the de-institutionalization of mental health particularly state psychiatric hospitals, has helped flood our streets with homeless men and women.

For purposes of assaying public policy - “Every state in the union incarcerates more people with severe mental illness than it hospitalizes.”

**Alcohol and Drug Addiction:** That alcohol and drug abuse contributes to homelessness is no recent discovery. Beginning in the 1870's, problems associated with alcohol as a cause of homelessness were published in newspapers and magazines such as Harper's Monthly (1870), The Outlook (1870), Woman's Journal (Boston) and Truth Magazine. Few writers said anything supportive of the homeless, and articles about homelessness were generally focused on itinerant “tramps” traversing the country in search of work. The primary emphasis at the time was on a perceived loss of character and an emerging moral crisis that threatened long-held ideas about home life. Homeless men were referred to as “vagabonds”, and the perceived solution was jobs, not affordable housing. Writers began laying the groundwork for the prohibition era, and connecting alcohol with homelessness was a common tactic. Today, a century and a half later, alcohol abuse remains one of the primary reasons for homelessness. Drug addiction deservedly so, has been added to the list.

Analysis of the role of drug addiction has revealed surprising variables. In 1991, *Jencks* research estimated that 30% of homeless single adults used *crack* regularly. By contrast, a 2018-2019 UBFM survey of 100 homeless men and women in Des Moines asking “what was the primary reason you became homeless” did not lead to a single reference to crack cocaine. The most frequently cited reason (22 of the 100 responses) was “*meth.*”

Abuse of alcohol or drugs: Slightly different paths to the same destination – homelessness.

**Military Jobs:** In Philadelphia, a detailed study revealed that a primary driver of homelessness among veterans was “military jobs.” Many of the skills taught in the military do not lead to civilian employment.

**Laziness:** A significant segment of the public has stigmatized the homeless: Homelessness is believed

to be the result of laziness and indolence, composed of shiftless people, usually men, who would not work if a job was offered to them. There is an element of this, historically encapsulated by words like “tramp”, “bum” or “hobo.” Homeless men were known as “vagrants.” While there is evidence that some people, almost always men, find a place in the culture of homelessness, experts attribute no more than 10% of homelessness to this factor. Critics should bare in mind an interesting factoid: 44% of homeless man and women work an average of 30 hours per week.

**Economic Downturn:** An obvious relationship between the economy and the homeless has existed for centuries. The Great Depression led to widespread unemployment and homelessness, chronicled by works such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. To a lesser extent, the recession of 2008 had the same effect. The current recession, set in motion by the novel coronavirus pandemic, is believed to have begun to drive homelessness.

**Lack of Affordable Healthcare:** When those on the economic margins of society suffer with their health, as little as one unanticipated illness can, and frequently does, lead to homelessness.

**Trauma and Domestic Violence:** Beginning in the late 70's, studies began to demonstrate a link between trauma and homelessness, particularly among younger homeless people. One study revealed that as much as 50% of the homeless population had suffered from physical abuse, and almost 1/3 from sexual abuse. A 2005 study by the U.S. Conference of Mayors reported that half of the cities surveyed listed domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness, particularly among women and teens. 58% of homeless adolescents had experienced running away, out-of-home placement or early departure from home, almost all as a result of violence.

**Minimum Wage:** Numerous studies demonstrate a relationship between a low minimum wage and homelessness. A study in Philadelphia related homelessness to 3 factors; low minimum wage, inadequate public transportation, and vacillations in the federal safety net including food stamps; unemployment insurance; vocational education; AFDC (Aid to Families With Dependent Children). Once again, the predominant reason for homelessness is public policy.

**SOLUTIONS:** Any discussion of solutions to homelessness, beyond mentioning and repeating the words “Public Policy” are obviously beyond the scope of this paper. One issue, however, deserves mention – housing the homelessness.

**Shelters:** One resource strongly advised that society needs to “not just house, but treat the homeless.” The extent to which society has succeeded in sheltering and treating varies considerably. Iowa, by example, has done well in most respects.

One method of calculating success involves tracking the number of shelters that require frequent police assistance. Iowa shelters are not hot spots for police activity. Comparatively, Iowa's shelters are well staffed, clean, and safe. Cooperation among the various agencies is optimal, and many of the services needed to help people escape homelessness are readily available. In other states, particularly in high-density cities, data is far less encouraging. One study revealed:

“Conditions in present-day shelters, particularly in urban centers, have been described as overcrowded, oppressive, dangerous, unhealthy, and similar to nineteenth-century almshouses and the worst of mental institutions.” Clearly, if homelessness is to be eliminated, or even meaningfully reduced,

shelters are the first, not the last step.

**HEALTH AND HOMELESSNESS:** Concern for the health of the homeless and those with whom they interact is critically important, particularly during the era of COVID-19. For decades, it has been known that the homeless suffer from poor general health, for multiple reasons: contagion; inadequate nutrition; air and water pollution; sleep deprivation; drug and alcohol abuse; suppression of the innate immune system; mental problems, and even the weather. A study by the National Coalition for the Homeless concluded that at least 700 homeless people die every year from hypothermia. Technically, “hypothermia” means a lower-than-normal body temperature: for the homeless, it means freezing to death.

**Closing Thoughts and a Recommendation:** Hopefully, this paper has helped to elucidate the extent of the blight of homelessness. If not, a final notation:

For the chronically homeless, life itself is an upriver challenge. In 2014, the University of Tennessee Health Science Center summarized a study of homeless morbidity. “The average estimated life span of a chronically homeless person is between 42 and 52 years.”

**Preparatory Field Trip:** For students living in or near Des Moines, a walk, a bicycle ride, or a brief drive around city streets will serve to illustrate how manifest homelessness is. Drive east on I-235 to the East 14<sup>th</sup> exit, and you will see, on most days, one or two people standing at the intersection with a hand-crafted poster reading “Homeless – anything helps.” Drive one additional block to East 15<sup>th</sup> Street, turn left onto north bound East 15<sup>th</sup>, and glance to the east. You will notice, on most days, from one to as many as four homeless people living under the bridge. At the time of this report, (July 2020) three of the people residing there are a mother and her 2 daughters. Depending on the day, from three to as many as a half-dozen homeless people live under the Fleur Drive bridge. One mid-thirties gentleman has lived there for almost 2 years.

Drive back downtown and proceed to the homeless shelter at 14<sup>th</sup> and Mulberry. One block west of the shelter you will notice a street you are probably not familiar with – Falcon Drive. Note the one to two dozen cars parked along both sides of the drive; each vehicle is “home” to one or more homeless citizens of Iowa's capitol city.

**RESOURCES:** The following resources were utilized for this research, and are recommended for anyone seeking to better understand Homelessness.

*National Alliance to End Homelessness*

*National Centre on Homelessness and Poverty*

*U.S. Census Bureau*

*Tent City USA: The Growth of America's Homeless Encampments and How Communities are Responding* (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty)

*U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)*

*Department of Commerce (State of Washington)*

*Department of Veteran's Affairs (VA)*

*Des Moines Area Religious Council (DMARC)*

*Volunteers of America*

*Bethel Rescue Mission*

*The Salvation Army* (Began in the late 1800's with the mantra “Soup, Soap, and Salvation”)

*Home Aid* (A national non-profit that builds and renovates multi-unit shelters for America's temporarily homeless men and women)

*Hope Ministries* (Member agency of *Polk County Continuum of Care* and *Polk County Housing Continuum*)

*Central Iowa Shelter and Services*

*Polk County Housing Trust Fund*

*Food Bank of Iowa*

*USC Initiative to Eliminate Homelessness*

*JOPPA* (Local non-profit serving the homelessness)

*The Medical Care Blog*

*National Coalition for the Homeless*

*McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act*

*National Low Income Housing Coalition*

*U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness*

*Homeless Rights Advocacy Project @ Seattle University*

*National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty*

*State Index on Youth Homelessness* (Evaluates all states on their efforts to prevent and end youth homelessness)

*The Culture of Homelessness* by Megan Ravenhill (Based on interviews with 250 homeless people in the U.K.)

*Homeless: Poverty and Place in Urban America* by Ella Howard, Armstrong Atlantic State University (Tracing the history of skid rows, particularly New York's Bowery, and how destruction of the rows removed the public housing and social services they provided)

*Health Science Center* (Univ. of Tennessee)

*Reckoning with Homelessness: The Anthropology of Contemporary Issues* (Kim Hopper – 2002)

*Homeless Mothers: Face to Face with Women and Poverty* (Deborah Connolly)

*Homelessness in America* (Jim Baumohi – 1996)

*Helping America's Homeless: Emergency Shelter or Affordable Housing* (Laudan Aron – 2001 – considered one of the most in-depth analysis of homelessness ever published)

*An Evaluation of VA programs for homeless vets* (Robert Rosenheck MD – Yale Medical School)

*America's Homeless* (1989 by Martha Burt and Barb Cohen)

*At Home on the Street: People, Poverty and the Hidden Culture of Homelessness* (2009 – Jason Adam Wasserman and Jeffrey Michael Clair)

*The Man in the Dog Park: Coming up close to Homelessness* (2020 - Cathy A. Small and Jason Kordosky)

*Otherwise Homeless: Vehicle living and the Culture of Homelessness* (2013 - Michele Wakin) (Examines the growing phenomena of vehicle living and why estimates of homelessness may be low)

*Hobo Jungle: A Homeless Community in Paradise* 2020 by Michele Wakin (Examines a homeless jungle encampment that has endured since the Great Depression in one of the most opulent cities in California)

*Down and Out in America: The Origins of Homelessness* (1989 – Peter Rossi) Explores the striking differences between homelessness in the 50's and 60's and the late 80's: More women, more children, more blacks)

*UBFM* (Urban Bicycle Food Ministry)

*Left Out in America: The State of Homelessness in the U.S.* (2006 by Pat LaMarche – Boston College) Preparatory to writing the book, the author slept in 14 homeless shelters over 2 weeks, later describing



homelessness as “A current humanitarian crisis.”

*Tell Them Who I Am: The lives of Homeless Women* by Elliot Liebow (1995)

*Homeless Link* (Research by Shelter estimates 320,000 “roofless” in the U.K)

*Million Dollar Murray* by Malcom Gladwell, New Yorker Magazine (2006)

(W.E. Shackelford - Program Committee – July 2020)