

Current State of Homelessness

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Are We Telling the Truth?

The US Department of Housing and Urban Development runs a point in time count every year that is the only comprehensive count of who is experiencing homelessness. In 2017, 553,742 people were found to be homeless on one night. By contrast, the Department of Education found that in the 2013-2014 school year, there were 1.3 million students who were homeless in the public education system alone. The Chicago Coalition for the Homeless undertook its own analysis of homeless counts, and while the HUD point in time count found 5,889 homeless persons in 2015, the coalition analyzed U.S. Census data to better calculate the “doubled up” households and concluded that 82,212 people were homeless in Chicago at some point during 2015.

The difference in numbers lies in how the departments define homelessness. HUD has adopted a narrow definition of homelessness that doesn't include families who have doubled up with friends or family, nor formerly homeless persons who are staying in apartments funded by HUD homeless dollars. Further, many folks who live in motels, vehicles, or other hidden locations do not interact with the homeless service agencies or volunteers conducting counts. The Department of Education on the other hand, includes those students who might be staying in temporary living situations with family or friends, allowing for a much broader count.

What About Shelter and Affordable Housing?

Over the last decade, HUD's homeless programs have been focused on permanent supportive housing, at the expense of emergency and transitional shelter. These programs are targeting about 35% of all of those experiencing homelessness, while emergency and transitional shelters for the remaining 65% have been closing.

Housing First programs work, if there is housing available! However, many of these programs rely on vouchers for residents to access the private market and there is widespread discrimination against, and overcharging, of formerly homeless households trying to get into housing using vouchers.

At a time of high volumes of development and inner city gentrification, housing is just too expensive. Since the late 1970's, the Federal government has essentially gotten out of the business of affordable housing. It simply isn't profitable for the private market to provide low income housing. In rural communities where housing might not cost as much normally, moderate to low income housing just is not being built.

Why Are So Many People Living Outdoors?

Short answer: there is not enough affordable housing or shelter available. Consider this, HUD's 2017 Point in Time count found 553,742 homeless people, of whom, 360,867 were sheltered and 192,875 unsheltered. The count also found 899,059 beds available, 56% (or 503,473) of beds were dedicated to housing people who were formerly homeless, 44% (or 395,586) were temporary places in emergency shelters, safe havens, or transitional housing programs.

Here is what you can do RIGHT NOW:

1. Treat everyone with dignity and compassion.

If you encounter someone who is homeless, treat them like a human being.

Look them in the eye. Say hello. Ask if there is anything you can do to help them.

2. Register to vote.

Vote in your local, state and federal elections – they happen every year in many communities.

Ask your candidates what they will do to fix our affordable housing crisis.

Vote for legislators that care about our most vulnerable neighbors.

Once elected, keep reminding your legislators to focus on keeping our social safety net strong.

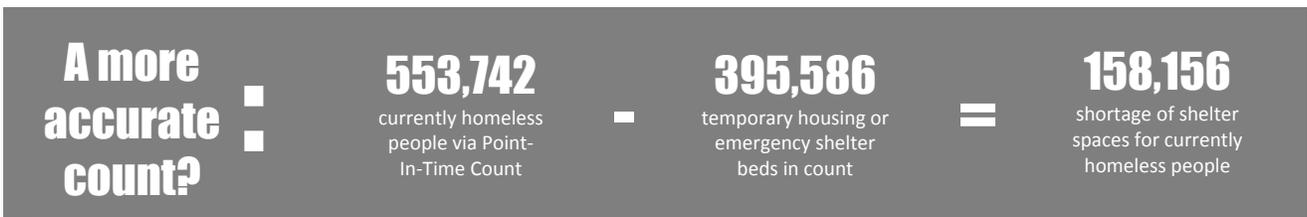
We cannot seek achievement for ourselves and forget about progress and prosperity for our community... Our ambitions must be broad enough to include the aspirations and needs of others, for their sakes and for our own.

-Cesar Chavez

As mentioned above, many, if not all, of those living in the 503,473 units for formerly homeless folks were not counted, though those units are being paid for with homeless dollars. Add these to the total homeless count and we would have a total of 1,057,215 people who are currently or were recently homeless being served by HUD and local homeless funds.

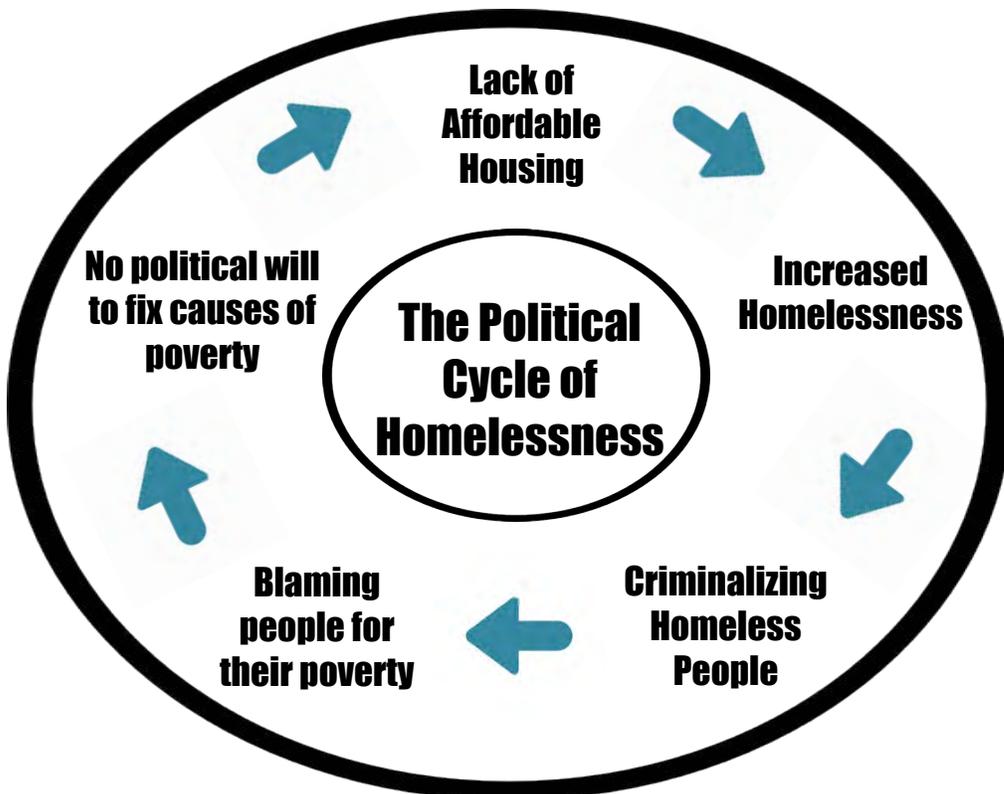


If we assume that the difference between the number of sheltered homeless folks and the number of emergency and transitional shelter beds (34,719 beds) are beds that are currently vacant, we would still have 158,156 currently homeless folks for which there is no shelter available.



Criminalizing Poor People

Many communities have been responding to increased numbers of unsheltered homeless folks by making it illegal to sleep outdoors, share food in public places, panhandle or even sit or lie down on public land. These types of ordinances not only create increased barriers for homeless folks to get into housing (fines, arrest records, loss of personal and survival items), but they also reinforce a sense that “these people” are not wanted in our communities.



#HOUSING NOT HANDCUFFS

NO PLACE TO GO?

While no city in America has enough emergency shelter beds to meet the needs of all of its homeless citizens,

18%

have city-wide bans on sleeping in public, leaving many homeless men, women, and children with no legal place for them to lay their heads.

Just how big is this problem? Very. Below are five cities where, due to a sleeping ban and a shortage of shelter beds, large percentages of residents have no legal place to sleep.

#####	23% - Phoenix, AZ
#####	29% - Virginia Beach, VA
#####	35% - Atlantic City, NJ
#####	41% - Colorado Springs, CO
#####	58% - Santa Barbara, CA

Laws like these, which criminalize human beings for not being able to afford a place to live are not only unjust, but also unconstitutional. Please join NCH and organizations around the country in demanding that everyone in America deserves #HousingNotHandcuffs!

www.nationalhomeless.org

Based on data from the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty report, "Housing Not Handcuffs."

Here's the Larger Picture

Income inequality is growing. Labor unions have lost strength. The Federal minimum wage, most all wages really, have not kept up with the cost of living. Service industry jobs are increasing providing fewer benefits and unpredictable hours. More and more workers are turning to the gig economy, or temporary/contract/part-time work that is neither guaranteed nor provides benefits. Limited low to moderate income housing that is available keeps increasing in cost, as vacancy rates fall to all-time lows.

More-over, the tax plan recently passed that gives tax relief to high-income earners and large corporations will likely lead to decreased investment in low-income housing through the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit. HUD has delayed several Fair Housing rules that were put in place to ensure better access to housing for low-income and marginalized communities of color. The President's suggested budget for the upcoming fiscal year has suggested deep cuts to poverty relief programs from housing to food assistance.

More so than ever, Americans of all backgrounds are just one paycheck away from homelessness. Our middle class is disappearing, health care costs are increasing, and we are facing a future of austerity and economic shift.

What Can We Do About It?

Action starts locally, we need concerned citizens following and participating in municipal government. Laws and practices that criminalize or harass people who are homeless are passed by cities and counties. We must stop this practice immediately. Several states and cities have considered Homeless Bills of Rights, to protect the civil rights of those experiencing homelessness, while longer term solutions are found. Again, violation of civil and human rights leads to dehumanization of our neighbors.

Many cities are promoting gentrification and development of luxury or high cost housing. This does not trickle down to make existing housing affordable to families with low incomes. We need dedicated and deeply affordable housing for those making the minimum wage and less. Developers should not be receiving huge tax deductions from our cities to build only market rate or above housing.

States often provide additional funding for emergency services and housing. Many states have created Housing Trust Funds, but more states need to adopt this practice, and further, protect funds raised for the creation solely of low-income housing. The Florida Housing Trust Fund, for example, has been raided several times to fund budget shortfalls in other areas.

Federally, the presidential administration has suggested deep cuts to social services across the board in both its fiscal year 2018 and 2019 budgets. While these are only suggestions made to congress, it should be deeply disturbing that at a time of such great need, anyone in a governing position would suggest that we need to cut food assistance, or health care, or housing.

Links

HUD Point-in-Time reports: <https://www.hudexchange.info/programs/hdx/guides/ahar/#reports>

Federal Definitions of Homelessness: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/runaway-and-homeless-youth/federal-definitions>

Housing Trust Funds: <https://housingtrustfundproject.org/>

Homeless Bills of Rights: <http://wraphome.org/what/homeless-bill-of-rights/>

Find lots more info at www.nationalhomeless.org