

# Rural Homelessness

Published by the National Coalition for the Homeless  
August 2020

---

## Overview

Homelessness is often assumed to be an urban phenomenon because homeless people are more numerous, more geographically concentrated, and more visible in urban areas. However, people experience the same difficulties associated with homelessness and housing distress in America's small towns and rural areas as they do in urban areas. A 2019 poll conducted by NPR, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that one out of three rural Americans report homelessness being present in their community. Often, rural homelessness is referred to by professionals in the field as the, "hidden homeless" as the homeless population in rural areas often lives in woods, cars, or doubled up with family/friends. Up until recently, those that were in temporary housing conditions were not even considered homeless by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

## Causes

Rural areas typically lack a sufficient amount of social service organizations, forcing homeless individuals to travel to urban areas in order to see a service provider. Without public transportation, if an individual does not have access to a working car, accessing services, not to mention finding employment, becomes challenging. Additionally, the social service organizations that exist in rural areas typically offer less assistance, specifically less shelter, than those in Urban locations. The expanse of rural areas makes significant service providers expensive, especially considering the varied needs of the population. As such, despite immense need in rural locations, Federal assistance programs are typically initiated in urban areas.

A lack of decent affordable housing underlies rural homelessness. Despite low housing costs in rural areas, rural incomes remain low, leading to similarly high rent burdens. Furthermore, the affordable housing is poor, often jeopardizing the health and safety of inhabitants. This often leads to homelessness while residents search for both safe and affordable housing.

Finally, problems defining, locating, and sampling have made enumerating the homeless population with certainty virtually impossible with estimates commonly relying on counts of persons using services that are inaccessible.

## Policy Recommendations

Efforts to end rural homelessness are complicated by isolation, lack of awareness, and lack of resources. Helpful Initiatives would include increasing outreach to isolated areas, and increasing networking and awareness about rural homelessness on a national level.

Ultimately, however, ending homelessness in rural areas requires jobs that pay a living wage, adequate income supports for those who cannot work, affordable housing, access to health care and transportation.

## Resources

1. Rural Homelessness. (2018, October 18). Retrieved August 05, 2020, from <https://endhomelessness.org/resource/rural-homelessness/>
2. Meehan, M. (2019, July 04). Unsheltered And Uncounted: Rural America's Hidden Homeless. Retrieved August 05, 2020, from <https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/07/04/736240349/in-rural-areas-homeless-people-are-harder-to-find-and-to-help>
3. *The 2019 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress* (Rep.). (n.d.).
4. Life in Rural America: Part II. (2019, December 20). Retrieved August 05, 2020, from
5. Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Health Care for Homeless People. (1988, January 01). The Rural Homeless. Retrieved August 05, 2020, from <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK218242/>
6. Administrator. (n.d.). Rural Homelessness. Retrieved August 05, 2020, from <http://ruralhome.org/sct-information/rural-voices/1315-rvfmarch2016>