

Subgroups of People Experiencing Homelessness

Approximately 2.3 to 3.5 million Americans experience homelessness at least once annually.⁹ The field of homelessness has long divided people experiencing homelessness into three groups: single adults, some of whom are referred to as “chronically homeless”; unaccompanied youth; and families with children. Each of these groups has its own needs and characteristics. Federal, state, and community-based programs often target their services to one particular group.

Single adults¹⁰

Single adults comprise about 49% of the total homeless population, and the majority are male. Thirty-seven percent of single adults have been homeless three or more times as adults, and 34% have been homeless for more than 25 months.¹¹ Twenty-three percent are veterans. More than 20% experienced homelessness as children.

Single adults who are homeless have a multitude of needs in addition to stable housing. Their lives on the streets are often marked by violence, hunger, health problems, social isolation, and the challenges of living outdoors in extreme weather and without access to showers or bathroom facilities. Many have experienced significant traumatic stress and violence. At least 25% were physically or sexually abused. As children, 27% lived in foster care, group homes, or other institutional settings. As adults, many suffer from mental illness and addictions. Sixty-nine percent report using alcohol and drugs, or having had mental health problems in the past 30 days. Many of these individuals often have limited education and job skills.

Unaccompanied Youth¹² Approximately 575,000 to 1.6 million unaccompanied youth are on the streets and in shelters annually in the United States (sometimes referred to as runaway youth). These young people are unattached to families and range in age from 16 to about 22 years. Family conflict and violence is the primary cause of their homelessness, and nearly half (46%) have been abused. Services for this population are limited, although many have had extensive involvement with service systems as children, particularly foster care. Roughly 20% to 40% are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Questioning, Intersex, or Two-Spirited (GLBTQI2-S), and their coming out often leads to being kicked out of their homes or physically assaulted. These youth commonly are dealing with mental health and substance use issues, and often engage in risky sexual behaviors that put them at high risk of contracting HIV. GLBTQI2-S youth who are unaccompanied are seven times more likely to be victims of a violent crime.

Families with Children¹³ Families with children comprise 34% of the homeless population¹⁴. Eighty-four percent are female-headed. The average homeless family is headed by a single mother who is in her late twenties and has two young children. These women often do not have more than a high school diploma or GED. Nearly all mothers experiencing homelessness have histories of severe violent victimization. More than one-third have PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder) – three times the rate of the general female population. More than 50% of mothers experience a major depressive episode while homeless, and 85% report having had a major depressive episode in the past.¹⁵ To alleviate their distress, 41% have become dependent on alcohol and/or drugs – a rate twice as high as the general female population. Many are in poor physical health. Over one-third have a chronic medical problem such as asthma, chronic bronchitis, or hypertension. The children in these families also have extensive needs, as described in this Report Card. Within a single year, nearly all (97%) homeless children have moved, 25% have witnessed violence, and 22% have been separated from their families. About half of all school-age children experiencing homelessness have problems with anxiety and depression. Twenty percent of homeless preschoolers have emotional problems that require professional care. Their education is often disrupted and challenges in school are common.