

This update is further adapted from the
2005 adaptation by Sally Kinney
for the
Interfaith Task Force on Homelessness,
from the original work,
"The Myths and Facts of Homelessness,"
by the Rev. Jean Kim

Statistics quoted in this report derive from sources including: "A Roof Over Every Bed in King County: Our Community's Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness"; The National Coalition for the Homeless; Washington State Coalition for the Homeless; Seattle King County Coalition for the Homeless; The City of Seattle; Real Change/First Things First; The National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness; The Institute for Research on Poverty; Statewide Poverty Action Network; The Seattle Post-Intelligencer; The Seattle Times

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Bill Kirlin-Hackett, Director Phone: 425.442.5418
E-mail: itfh@comcast.net Webpage: www.itfhomeless.org

HOMELESSNESS:

Myths and Facts

—2013—

3030 980043030 Bellevue Way NE, Bellevue WA 98004
425.442.5418 org425.442.5418 www.itfhomeless.org
2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014 2015

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on Homelessnesson Homelessness
creating the political will to end homelessness
in king county in ten years

Myth #1: It is impossible to end homelessness.

Fact: There is a growing national consensus that homelessness CAN be solved with the right plan, the right approach, and enough funding. As encouraged by the National Alliance to End Homelessness, many communities--including King County in our state--have enacted 10-year plans to end homelessness, which spell out what is needed to end homelessness instead of "managing" it. King County's plan, entitled "A Roof Over Every Bed in King County: Our Community's Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness," is the result of a collaboration between governmental entities, community service alliances, and religious organizations, and the 10-year countdown began locally in 2005. As the King county plan states, "Ending a complex problem like homelessness requires a commitment from all members of our community--government officials, philanthropies, faith and civic groups, communities of color and their institutions and organizations, businesses including small business owners, housing and service providers, and concerned individuals...Through endorsing this plan, communities throughout the county are joining forces to end homelessness...As a community we can--and we will--end homelessness."

Myth #2: Government policy has nothing to do with homelessness.

Fact: Government policy affects homelessness more than any other factor. All of the following elements are policy matters: building more single room occupancy (SRO) and low-income housing; raising the minimum wage; increasing the number of affordable day-care centers for low-income children; providing enough municipal emergency shelters; allowing congregations and other non-governmental organizations to provide shelters without restrictive regulations. These are a few of the remedies where government funds and/or policy come to bear. And it is especially important for all citizens to let their elected officials know that human service funding is important to them. Since 2004, an average of one-third of human services agencies nationwide reported decreased funding decisions by government sources. Ending homelessness is a policy issue that often extends to funding priorities. More than charity is necessary. Establishing economic justice is also needed.

Myth #3: The number of homeless people is exaggerated by homeless advocates.

Fact: In King County on any given day in 2013 there are more than 8,972 individuals who do not have permanent homes -- they are sleeping on the street, in cars, in shelters, or in temporary housing. That number represents the best point-in-time count available from human service usage statistics at the time that King County's 10-Year Plan was issued. Providers know this number actually undercounts the real number of homeless, some of whom remain "invisible" if they do not access services. National figures on homelessness are derived from statistics provided by human services providers, both governmental and non-governmental, and are also considered to be undercounts of the real problem of homelessness. There is ample documentation that homelessness has increased locally since 2005, while in 2013 the NAEH reports some population declines nationally. The last national count figures (2012) were 633,782 homeless. Emergency shelters surveyed in King County report that they've sustained over-capacity requests for shelter since 2003. Turnaways continue daily.

Myth #4: Homeless people are single white men standing on street corners with cardboard signs.

Fact: Homeless people are single men and women, families, children, workers--they span the demographics of our country. In 2013, 46.2 million people were in poverty, up from 39.8 million in 2009. As of 2013, families with children comprised 33% of the homeless, with proportions higher in rural areas. Families with children are averaging 6-12 months in

shelters before any other housing is found. In King County family shelters can be counted on one hand. Two-thirds of the single homeless are male of every race, and the single population accounts for three-quarters of all homeless

Nationally, nearly half of all women and children experiencing homelessness have fled from domestic violence, and this number has remained consistent for more than a decade.

Myth #5: Homeless people in my community come from someplace else.

Fact: Conditions in our own communities create and sustain homelessness. It is easy to claim that homeless people are "outsiders." But while some homeless people move around to find jobs and housing, most are scared to leave their own familiar communities, or are unable to move because of physical or mental difficulties, or because they don't have the financial means to move. Homeless persons seek a safe place, just as we do, and maintain the same freedoms all share to seek better opportunities.

Myth #6: Homelessness is just a big-city problem.

Fact: While homelessness is more visible in the cities, it has become a problem in rural areas as well, especially areas hard-hit by the economic downturn. Research indicates that families--usually single mothers with children--make up the largest group of homeless people in rural areas. However, there are far fewer shelters in rural areas, so they are more likely to live in a car or camper or with relatives or friends in over-crowded or substandard housing. If they can't access resources, they often don't get counted in statistics. Recently small towns are having some success reducing homelessness although in some cases this has been due to migration to cities where jobs exist.

Myth #7: Most or all homeless are people of color.

Fact: It's more a matter of economy and geography than color. Homeless people in rural areas are more likely to be white, female, married, currently working, homeless for the first time, and homeless for a shorter period of time. Homelessness among Native Americans and migrant workers is also largely a rural phenomenon. Homelessness in urban areas is proportionately higher among racial minorities than among whites, due to continuing socioeconomic disparities. In King County, although people of color represent approximately 27% of the general population, they represent 64% of people who are homeless. Nationally, 62% of homeless families are people of color; 43% are African-American.

Myth #8: The homeless are diseased and infectious.

Fact: The truth is that people suffering from disease and illness including HIV have an increased potential to become homeless. One primary cause of homelessness among those infected with disease is that they lose jobs because of poor or no health insurance, inadequate health care, discrimination, or because of their physical inability to work. Lack of affordable housing is a critical problem facing a growing number of people living with any disease. Few current statistics exist on this, and where once tracking was done on AIDS patients there has been a somewhat successful effort to house those suffering AIDS. Once homeless, those homeless have greater difficulty accessing medical services and thus have worse prognoses--and often greater visibility to the community--than those who are housed and have adequate services. With programs like Healthcare for the Homeless and Public health resources, the number of infectious homeless has been considerably reduced as a concern for the general public.

Myth #9: People are homeless because they lack intelligence and ambition.

Fact: Being homeless is a condition, not a character defect. Lawyers, nurses, mathematicians, teachers, those trained in the trades, and many other of our fellow citizens have found themselves homeless. Anyone can become homeless if they are forced into unemployment with no financial cushion, must immediately leave a domestic violence situation, are laid off with no unemployment

insurance, fall ill or become injured and can't qualify for disability, or become incapacitated due to mental illness. Being home-less is a condition, not a character flaw.

Myth #10: There are no veterans among the homeless population.

Fact: Approximately one-third of single homeless men are veterans. Estimates are that on any given night, just under 62,619 veterans nationwide are homeless, which recent studies have shown comprise about 13% of those homeless. Homeless veterans show an increased rate of co-occurring disorders and as yet receive inadequate VA help.

Myth #11: All homeless veterans are Vietnam or other war combat veterans

Fact: Studies have found that homelessness among veterans is not solely related to combat military experience. Some experience indicates homeless veterans appear less likely to have served in combat than housed veterans, which coincides with home-less vets also being women. Homeless vets are also part of family systems, not just single men. Recent wars in the middle east further increase the number of homeless vets.

Myth #12: There are no elderly persons among the homeless.

Fact: Homelessness is increasing among aged persons because of the declining availability of affordable housing and increased general poverty. In addition, there is growing consensus that homeless persons aged 50 and over should be included in the "older homeless" category because their physical condition deteriorates rapidly when they become homeless. Two of the top 3 causes of homeless--low income and high housing costs--affect the elderly as much or more than they do other segments of the population. And the elderly do not have future years of better employment prospects to give them hope to be able to climb out of their poverty. Rising health care is also contributing to the risk factors and realities of increasing homelessness as persons age.

Myth #13: The United States doesn't have the homelessness problem that the third world countries do.

Fact: Homelessness is increasing in the United States. Despite the fact that we are the wealthiest nation in the world, estimates are more than 42 million people in the United States lived in poverty, close to 15% of all Americans. Each year, the gap between rich and poor is steadily widening in our country. In third world countries, most homeless are political refugees fleeing for safety. Adding to the US crisis are those now undergoing record foreclosures and facing homelessness for the first time. In Europe the number and percent of population of those homeless is increasing. Yet, in some places in Europe, there are laws against homelessness; that is, laws aimed at elected officials who allow homelessness. Some nations have no word for the English, "homeless."

Myth #14: Homeless people choose their lifestyle.

Fact: A homeless life is not a comfortable one. Few would choose a lifestyle that can be quite unhealthy, is at times dangerous, stressful, and humiliating, and invite the abuse that homeless people receive from many in their communities. Some homeless people choose to sleep on the streets rather than in shelters because they are unsettled by shelter conditions and noise. Very few would choose the streets over a residence they could call home. Certainly, children do not choose homelessness, nor do victims of domestic violence, which is the leading cause of homelessness in women.

Myth #15: Their families should take care of the homeless.

Fact: Families of homeless individuals may themselves be destitute and unable to provide assistance to their relatives, no matter how they would wish to. While this may be desirable, uncontrollable factors make it an unreliable resource and solution. It is often forgotten that people who are homeless are autonomous, and leading them back toward being responsible and functioning neighbors ought to remain a top priority.

Myth #16: Our country has services for the mentally ill, so they shouldn't be homeless.

Fact: The number of mentally ill needing services has far outstripped the services available. In the 1960s about two million mentally-ill persons were de-institutionalized on the belief they'd receive more humane therapeutic care outside institutions. Communities were not ready for this influx. Mentally-ill persons were discharged to nursing homes, SRO rooms, hotels, boarding houses, and low-income housing units, often without necessary services. By the end of the 1960s, many mentally ill became the vanguard of our current homelessness crisis. Even with added recent local mental health funding, community mental health centers still do not have needed funding to provide care for all requiring it, nor is there adequate housing for them. Often, due to lack of adequate medication and consequent behavioral problems, they cycle between jail, involuntary commitment in community hospitals, and the streets, the former of which are the most expensive remedies. Recent numbers in King County show that 35% (plus/minus) of homeless persons were found to have a mental illness. Although many received treatment for their illness, they remain homeless due to lack of affordable housing.

Myth #17: There is plenty of housing and shelters for the poor and homeless.

Fact: The incomes of low-income households continue to decline as rents rise. In 2012 a worker needs to earn \$20.31 to afford a 2-bedroom apartment. As housing costs have continued to rise, the national minimum wage has remained at \$7.25/hour. In Washington, it is \$9.19/hour. Thus, in King County, a worker must now earn at least 2 times the minimum wage to afford a 2-bedroom apartment factoring in the increase in 2012 rents. Even when low-wage workers can afford to pay for rent, they often cannot save enough to pay move-in costs, which traps them in transitional housing which is time-limited, or in outright homelessness. Landlords continue to demand steep deposits, and poor credit histories bar too many from renting at all. As one result, in King County during the 2012 One Night Count, 2,736 persons were unsheltered, and that is an under-count. Less than 1% of King County apartments are affordable to households earning less than 30% of the area median income (about \$12.50/hour),

Myth #18: Homeless kids choose to run away from their homes because they don't want to obey rules.

Fact: Kids run away because their homes are unsafe. Many homeless youth--from early teen years up to 18--leave their homes after years of physical or sexual abuse, strained relationships, the addiction of a family member, or parental neglect. If they are accepted into foster care, at age 18 they are "aged out" with no further assistance, and some fall into prostitution or drug-selling for survival. Youth are heavily influenced by peers and this can exacerbate provision of services. Youth have unique housing needs and demand significantly more attention than is currently given their crisis.

Myth #19: Those homeless are alcoholics or drug addicts; they refuse to stop.

Fact: Estimates are about one-quarter to one-third of the homeless population are or have been substance abusers or addicts. Many are dually diagnosed, which means that they suffer from mental illness as well, making it harder for them to cope with their addictions. If they have become homeless due to factors other than addiction, they may turn to alcohol or drugs to ease the pain of their lives, just as the housed do. However, because they usually must live their lives in public, they cannot hide their addictions, as the housed can. Street outreach is underfunded and understaffed; help remains insufficient. Without the necessary supports, these likely will remain homeless.

Myth #20: Homeless people don't seem to want help.

Fact: The experience of being homeless can create fear of strangers, even those offering help. Some homeless people suffer from paranoid disorders. Others may have been severely abused in the past--especially homeless youth--and don't trust adults. In particular, domestic violence victims experience difficulty in trusting. Some have experienced involuntary hospitalizations in locked

mental wards, physical restraints, or adverse side effects from medications and are fearful of repeating the experience. For the majority who seek help, many are often turned away from shelters for lack of space, or cannot qualify for medical or financial help. Evidence reveals that options and assistance bring about personal responsibility. Homeless cannot be exited alone.

Myth #21: It is a waste of time and money to help homeless people.

Fact: Not true. Homeless people who have access to/take advantage of resources (education, job training, medical treatment) show fast progress, moving back into the community. It is not a waste of time or money to help -- rather, it is a moral duty and responsibility, whatever the outcome. Every religious tradition practices and teaches this. For strategies, we have learned that Rapid Re-Housing saves up to 80% in tax-payer funds dedicated to emergency services. Better efficiency is a necessity.

Myth #22: The federal government provides Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and financial assistance for all homeless people. Isn't that enough?

Fact: It is not enough to sustain life. Nor do all homeless people qualify for SSI or financial assistance. SSI is for US citizens or permanent residents who are aged or permanently physically or mentally disabled; those conditions must be endorsed by a physician or psychiatrist and the qualification process is lengthy. Although some homeless do qualify, many do not. In addition, receiving services does not always save you from homelessness. Often women with children who receive Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF, or "welfare") are homeless due to the lack of low-income housing and affordable daycare. SSI benefits remain too low to rent a studio apartment, much less pay for other necessities. Washington now uses Housing and Essential Needs (HEN) for those homeless with medical diagnosis. Other homeless no longer receive help. (WA State ended its General Assistance programs).

Myth #23: Homeless people are violent and dangerous.

Fact: "Most of the homeless are not a serious or dangerous threat to society," Dr. Pamela Fisher explains in *Criminal Activity Among the Homeless*. "They are more victims than perpetrators. The homeless are primarily victims of structural forces and governmental policies that subject them to all forms of abuse, neglect, and dehumanization.

And while many homeless persons resign themselves to indignities and degradations, other struggle valiantly against the crime of homelessness, against their own criminalization, and against the crimes of others who prey on society's most vulnerable members." Homeless women, teens, and children especially are often the victims of such crimes as physical and sexual assault, robberies, rape, and even murder. Being safe is the paramount concern for those who are homeless.

Myth #24: Congregations can't operate shelters because insurance companies don't cover such activities.

Fact: Usually, the insurance coverage for an individual congregation covers the shelter.

Congregations that have trouble in getting insurance coverage ought to check with denominational leaders and with neighboring faith communities. Shelters within a congregation are permitted under the provisions of the Religious Land Use and Institutional Persons Act of 2000 (www.rluipa.com). Congregations have excellent records with shelter. In 2010 ESHB 1956 was passed in Washington State bringing further clarity to hosting by religious organizations.

Myth #25: Services such as emergency shelters and missions only attract additional homeless and increase crime in neighborhoods.

Fact: Some unfairly charge that those homeless travel across country to spend time in a shelter. People travel in search of jobs and opportunities. If those opportunities don't work out, assistance, including shelters, is needed for homeless people living in any particular area, whether they have lived there all their lives or have

come in search of work. Shelters ensure adjacent vagrancy does not follow a night's rest and residents are encouraged to disperse to find work, and so on.. Emergency shelters do not endanger the safety or values of a neighborhood. When homeless persons commit crimes, the crimes are largely victimless and often a direct result of not having a home. The availability of a shelter may actually curb some of the everyday arrests of the homeless. With a safe place to sleep, they do not need to break into abandoned buildings in an attempt to find a sheltering roof..

Myth #26: It is someone else's job to help homeless people--charitable groups or religious organizations will do it.

Fact: Helping poor and homeless people is everyone's job. Many of the pro-grams that help wouldn't be there without the involvement and generosity of so many individuals. Almost all American families, some of them low-income them-selves, make contributions to at least one charity program. Charitable groups derive the majority of their income from individual Americans, as do religious organizations.

Homelessness is a community problem; the community as a whole, and each individual within that community, in their own way, should participate in the solution, including advocating for adequately-funded, tax-supported programs to raise Americans out of poverty and keep others from sinking into poverty and homelessness. That takes more than charity; it takes building political will. As we teach, "affirm charity, compassion, and justice;" knowing that charity and compassion, and justice and compassion, are powerful tools to end homelessness.