

## ***Getting Beyond Stereotypes of the Homeless***

*By Christina Momono*

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty<sup>1</sup> envisions access to affordable housing as a right and not a privilege for individuals and families. That hope is relative and necessary to uphold as our nation faces a housing crisis. Several published studies emulate these values and provide perspective on homelessness in order to facilitate solutions. Perhaps the United States can take the lead behind the astonishing achievements that Finland<sup>2</sup> has made, particularly by slashing their homeless population<sup>3</sup> by reallocating money from temporary shelters to long term permanent housing for the homeless. Finland follows the “housing first” model, but goes the extra step to build permanent housing solutions, which has decreased homeless numbers significantly. The United States could embrace this approach by providing more long-term permanent options for residents in the United States.

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), there were 567,715 homeless people in 2019 in the nation<sup>4</sup>. This number is determined by a “one shot” point-in-time count conducted on *one* day in the winter, when 3,000 cities and counties<sup>5</sup> throughout the states attempt to count the homeless. It is not a complete count but is representative of the homeless status of adults currently. Additionally, the US Department of Education has stated that there were 1.3 million homeless schoolchildren in 2016-2017.<sup>6</sup> The numbers of reported homeless by different agencies vary due to differing counting methodologies and barriers that the homeless face. Homeless people may go uncounted, as they may not access shelters, but instead double up with people they know. Most homeless are transient, moving from location to location. Some homeless hide and remain hidden due to the shame of being homeless, and some maybe in jail temporarily due to violations of local ordinances that are harsh to homeless people. There are many reasons why it is difficult to count the homeless. However, homelessness continues to increase. HUD has determined that 19 states’ homeless populations have increased. Further, research shows that the homeless population has increased significantly in the Western states particularly California and Washington.

The reasons for homelessness go beyond the chronically homeless<sup>7</sup> who are considered people who have been homeless for a year or more and who have a chronic condition including serious mental illness, substance abuse issues, or a physical disability<sup>8</sup> that create enormous barriers to resettling them in permanent housing. Chronically homeless people are often the people that come to mind when one pictures an image of a homeless person. However, the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HOUSING-NOT-HANDCUFFS-2019-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.economist.com/europe/2019/12/18/finland-has-slashed-homelessness-the-rest-of-europe-is-failing>

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/homelessness-finland-housing-first\\_n\\_5c503844e4b0f43e410ad8b6](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/homelessness-finland-housing-first_n_5c503844e4b0f43e410ad8b6)

<sup>4</sup> [https://www.hud.gov/press/press\\_releases\\_media\\_advisories/HUD\\_No\\_19\\_177](https://www.hud.gov/press/press_releases_media_advisories/HUD_No_19_177)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.hudexchange.info/news/hud-reports-homelessness-unchanged-in-u-s-in-2018-with-notable-declines-among-veterans-and-families-with-children/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://nche.ed.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Federal-Data-Summary-SY-14.15-to-16.17-Final-Published-2.12.19.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/who-experiences-homelessness/chronically-homeless/>

<sup>8</sup> Id; <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/USICH-Opening-Doors-2015-Amendment.pdf>

narratives of people who are homeless continually change. People are homeless for multiple reasons<sup>9</sup>: fleeing from domestic violence, dealing with financial difficulties that create housing hardships including evictions, and even people who are employed who have difficulty finding available quality, safe housing.<sup>10</sup> They are also veterans, women, and families with children, including single mothers and fathers who are struggling. Most people are homeless because they cannot find affordable, reliable housing. They may believe they fare better living in their car, finding a spot on the street or hopping from couch to couch in unpredictable and unsettling ways.

People of color are disparately at risk for homelessness. People of color are 60% of the nation's homeless population yet are only one third of the United States population. Forty percent of homeless people are black, although they make up 13% of the general population.<sup>11</sup> Seventy percent of poor black people and 63% of poor Hispanics live in high poverty compared to 35% of whites.<sup>12</sup> Historical policies and practices such as redlining, blockbusting, steering, restrictive zoning, and racial and socioeconomic segregation have disproportionately affected people of color, contributing to lower wealth accumulation, lower homeownership rates, and increased vulnerability to homelessness. Due to past zoning policies, segregation produced concentrated poverty neighborhoods with fewer opportunities for economic growth. Today, when people of color try to rent they often still face discrimination, manifested as refusal to rent, or different terms and conditions in rentals. They may be shown fewer rentals, denied leases based on credit compared to white individuals, and may be quoted higher rental and deposit prices. This discrimination does not only happen in housing but it also occurs in employment. Acknowledging this history and present realities are important when determining how best to end homelessness and create more integrated neighborhoods of opportunity.

Another factor underlying homelessness lies the huge economic issue of at least half of the entire United State renter population being "cost burdened" to pay rent; meaning, they are paying more than 30% of their income towards housing costs. This is a hardship especially because renters also have other income needs such as transportation, food, medical costs, and childcare care expenses. Being cost-burdened affects multiple renters in different income levels, but our nation's poorest renters feel the burden more heavily than other renters because their options are fewer, and they often end up without a suitable place to call home. As reported in a recent study, *Dynamics in Homelessness in Urban America*<sup>13</sup>, which reviewed the relationship between housing costs and homelessness in 25 of the largest metropolitan cities, as housing costs continually to increased, even by 10%, homeless populations increased significantly as well. Moreover, a recent study done by Washington State discovered that in Seattle half of the renters that became homeless were facing eviction because they were behind only one month in rent. Being cost-burdened leaves little room for unexpected expenses or economic error. Furthermore, once a person has been evicted, that court record becomes a nearly insurmountable barrier to accessing quality and affordable housing. Evictions

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<sup>9</sup> <http://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HOUSING-NOT-HANDCUFFS-2019-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> <http://rockcenter.nbcnews.com/news/2012/11/28/15490042-employed-but-still-homeless-working-poor-say-homelessness-can-happen-to-anybody>

<sup>11</sup> <http://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HOUSING-NOT-HANDCUFFS-2019-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <http://nlchp.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HOUSING-NOT-HANDCUFFS-2019-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> Id.

often lead to job loss, and health problems, including higher rates of depression. Due to competitive rental market, with limited available adequate housing, less qualified tenants are steered to substandard housing, and then onto the road to homelessness. Half of all renters are people of color in the United States: 54.9% are black, 53.5% are Latinx, and 45.7% are Asian or other minorities. People of color, who are already face racial discrimination in access to housing, are disparately impacted by the risk of being tenants in low vacancy, rising cost housing markets.

Sadly, homelessness is increasing each year and the myths and stereotypes about it are not accurate or helpful. Understanding the depth of homelessness, and the new faces that are present in its battle are important. It is an important reality to confront; it seems that more populations face greater fragility than in the past as though a buoy floating just above the water of a national housing crisis. The realities that need to surface are necessary to approach the real homelessness issues at hand to create astonishing accomplishments where communities are not being built in shallow ways, but with greater foundations that create long term security in housing stability.

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