

Homelessness

According to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, approximately 3.5 million people in the United States, 1.35 million of which are children, experience homelessness in a given year.¹ One of the most misunderstood social problems of our day, homelessness is not restricted to a specific population; it affects all races and all demographics including families with children, teenagers, single adults, and the elderly. Across the world in large cities, suburban neighborhoods and rural communities, homelessness is rampant. A stunning 100 million people are thought to be homeless worldwide.²

Defining “homeless” is not easy. The United States Code defines the term “homeless” or “homeless individual or homeless person” to include:

- an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and
- an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is—
 - a supervised publicly or privately operated shelter designed to provide temporary living accommodations (including welfare hotels, congregate shelters, and transitional housing for the mentally ill);
 - an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or
 - a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings.³

It’s not uncommon for a city’s homeless population to exceed available shelters and temporary housing— therefore, many people are not factored into the homeless “count.” For example, of the children and youth identified as homeless by the Department of Education in 2000, only 35 percent lived in shelters, 34 percent lived doubled-up with family or friends, and 23 percent lived in motels or other locations.⁴

Who’s affected?

A crisis affecting people of all races, ages and genders, the root of U.S. homelessness is a shortage of affordable housing coupled with an increase in poverty. It’s no surprise that demographic groups more likely to experience poverty are also more likely to experience homelessness.⁵ Some statistics on homeless demographics include:

¹ “How Many People Experience Homelessness?”, National Coalition for the Homeless, NCH Fact Sheet #2, National Coalition for the Homeless, August 2007

² “HUMAN RIGHTS: More Than 100 Million Homeless Worldwide”, IPS, Gustavo Capdevila, July 31, 2008, <<http://ipsnews.net/interna.asp?idnews=28086> >

³ “U.S Code Collection”, Cornell University Law School, July 31, 2008, <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/html/uscode42/usc_sec_42_00011302----000-.html >

⁴ “How Many People Experience Homelessness?”, National Coalition for the Homeless, NCH Fact Sheet #2 National Coalition for the Homeless, August 2007

⁵ “How Many People Experience Homelessness?”, National Coalition for the Homeless, NCH Fact Sheet #3, National Coalition for the Homeless, August 2007

- In 2003, children under the age of 18 accounted for 39 percent of the homeless population; 42 percent of these were under the age of five
- In 2004, 25 percent of homeless were between the ages of 25 and 34; 6 percent between 55 and 64
- In 2005, single men comprised 51 percent of the homeless population, compared to 17 percent of women
- Families are one of the fastest growing groups of homeless, with 25 U.S. cities reporting that families with children comprised 33 percent of the homeless population in 2005
- A 2004 survey of 27 U.S. cities found the homeless population to be comprised of 49 percent African-American, 35 percent Caucasian, 13 percent Hispanic, 2 percent Native American and 1 percent Asian⁶

Other groups more prone to become part of the homeless population include veterans, people with mental illness, and those suffering from addiction. Shockingly, 40 percent of homeless men have served in the armed forces. In fact, The National Coalition for Homeless estimates that on any given night 271,000 veterans are homeless.⁷ Those suffering from addiction are also more likely to become homeless. In their book, *A Nation In Denial*, Alice Baum and Donald Burnes found that 65 to 85 percent of all homeless adults suffer from chronic alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness or some combination of the three, often complicated by critical medical problems.⁸

Outside of the U.S., homelessness is a serious problem in developing countries. Miloon Kothari, an architect and independent consultant on adequate housing for the United Nations Commission of Human Rights, claims that there are large numbers of homeless in cities of 10-15 million people including India, Brazil, South Africa and the Philippines.⁹ Factors that most often contribute to homelessness in developing countries include poverty and housing shortages as well as war, natural disaster and disease.

The country with the largest number of internally displaced peoples (IDPs), those who are forced to flee their homes but remain within their country's borders, is Sudan, with more than 5 million. The Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that more than 4.2 million Iraqis have been displaced since the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.¹⁰ In 2007, the number of refugees under UNHCR's responsibility rose from 9.9 million to 11.4 million.¹¹ To make matters worse, refugees are often hosted by neighboring countries, creating an economic strain on those nations.

⁶ "How Many People Experience Homelessness?", National Coalition for the Homeless, NCH Fact Sheet #3, National Coalition for the Homeless, August 2007

⁷ "How Many People Experience Homelessness?", National Coalition for the Homeless, NCH Fact Sheet #3, National Coalition for the Homeless, August 2007

⁸ "Homelessness & Addiction Recovery: A Lasting Solution", *STEPS* magazine, Michael Liimatta, July 31, 2008, < <http://www.iugm.org/steps.html> >

⁹ John Zarocostas, "Homelessness Increasing All Over the World," *Washington Times* 11 Apr. 2005, national ed.

¹⁰ "Homelessness", Wikipedia, July 31, 2008, < <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homeless> >

¹¹ "2007 Global Trends: Refugees, Asylum-seekers, Returnees, Internally Displaced and Stateless Persons", The UN Refugee Agency,

Natural disasters are not only responsible for millions of deaths a year worldwide; they are also a huge catalyst for poverty and homelessness. Last year alone 234 million people were affected by more than 400 natural disasters, with 16,000 lives lost and millions of people displaced.¹² In our own backyard, one of the biggest migrations in U.S. history occurred as a result of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Aside from destroying valuable industry including oil and forestry, the hurricane eliminated approximately one million non-farm jobs and caused more than one million people in the central Gulf Coast to redistribute.¹³

Domestic Violence – A Catalyst for Homelessness

A sometimes unavoidable option, homelessness is often symptomatic of those dealing with domestic violence. Battered women often must choose between the streets or putting up with an abusive partner. A survey conducted in 2003 of 24 U.S. cities found that 50 percent of those homeless cited domestic violence as the primary cause.¹⁴ The statistics are alarming. Last year, 7 percent of American women (3.9 million) who are married or living with a significant other were physically abused, and 37 percent were verbally or emotionally abused by their partner. To put this into perspective, every 9 seconds a woman is physically abused by her husband.¹⁵

Surprisingly, there were no shelters for abused women in the United States until the 1970s.¹⁶ Nearly two decades ago the first battered women's shelter in the United States, Women's Advocates, was opened in St. Paul, Minnesota. This program is still in existence today.¹⁷ Over the last few decades, awareness of domestic violence has grown and so have the options available for women. Today, there are approximately 2,000 shelters¹⁸ and service programs for battered women— however, this pales in comparison to the 3,800 animal shelters reported in 1990.¹⁹

One of the most chronically underreported crimes, domestic violence continues to take a serious toll on our society, exceeding \$5.8 billion dollars each year, with \$4.1 billion directly going to medical and mental health services.²⁰ Many organizations such as the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, YMCA's

¹² "Protecting rights of natural disaster victims", Swiss News, Rita Emch, July 31, 2008, < http://www.swissinfo.org/eng/front/Protecting_rights_of_natural_disaster_victims.html?siteSect=108&sid=9362885&cKey=1216813772000&ty=st >

¹³ "Hurricane Katrina", Wikipedia, July 31, 2008, < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina >

¹⁴ "How Many People Experience Homelessness?", National Coalition for the Homeless, NCH Fact Sheet #3, National Coalition for the Homeless, August 2007

¹⁵ "Statistics of Battered Women", Lake County Crisis Center, FAQ, July 31, 2008, < <http://www.asafeplaceforhelp.org/batteredwomenstatistics.html> >

¹⁶ "Women/Children Fleeing Abuse", NPR, Housing First, Reed Karaim, July 31, 2008, < <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/housingfirst/whoneeds/abuse.html> >

¹⁷ "General Facts About Domestic Violence", National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, July 31, 2008, < <http://home.cybergrrl.com/dv/stat/statgen.html> >

¹⁸ "Women/Children Fleeing Abuse", NPR, Housing First, Reed Karaim, July 31, 2008, < <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/housingfirst/whoneeds/abuse.html> >

¹⁹ "General Facts About Domestic Violence", National Clearinghouse for the Defense of Battered Women, July 31, 2008, < <http://home.cybergrrl.com/dv/stat/statgen.html> >

²⁰ "Latest Research Statistics On Domestic Violence", Silent Witness National Initiative, August 1, 2008, < http://www.silentwitness.net/sub/latest_research.htm#costs >

Project Safe Place, and The Family Violence Prevention Fund are working toward eradicating domestic violence through education, events and various programs.

Temporary Housing and Shelters

One of the largest contributors to homelessness is a lack of affordable housing. A study conducted by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities found that the shortage of low-rent housing in the United States reached a record high in 1995 when the number of low-income renter households exceeded the number of low-cost rental units by 4.4 million.²¹ The study also found that two out of three poor renters receive no housing assistance and that approximately two million low-income households are on waiting lists for assistance.²²

Although some progress has been made with the availability of subsidized housing, recent policy modifications have slowed and, in some cases, completely stopped providing housing assistance to low-income households. In 1997 the number of new housing subsidies funded by the government was only one-seventh of the number of new subsidies in 1977.²³

The housing crisis has been further intensified by the events of 911 and the current economic slump. In 2001 it was reported by *The Christian Science Monitor* that a record number of homeless families were crowding into New York shelters. It was also reported that requests for supplies for the homeless were growing particularly in Georgia, where nearly 90 percent of shelters and homeless service providers witnessed increased appeals for beds, emergency relief and assistance paying utility and rent bills. At the same time, in Chicago all shelters were reporting full capacity forcing the city to resort to other alternatives like hotels.²⁴

The current economic downturn fueled by the subprime mortgage crisis has left many Americans in financial ruin, has brought new home building to a grinding halt, and has negatively impacted the world economy. In fact, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) says that the worldwide losses stemming from the U.S. sub prime mortgage crisis could run to \$945 billion.²⁵ Strain on the economy has, in turn, put strain on funding for nonprofit organizations and income for shelters.

Orphans

²¹"In Search of Shelter: The Growing Shortage of Affordable Rental Housing", Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, July 31, 2008, < <http://www.cbpp.org/615hous.htm> >

²² "In Search of Shelter: The Growing Shortage of Affordable Rental Housing", Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, July 31, 2008, < <http://www.cbpp.org/615hous.htm> >

²³ "In Search of Shelter: The Growing Shortage of Affordable Rental Housing", Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, July 31, 2008, < <http://www.cbpp.org/615hous.htm> >

²⁴ "US shelters swell - with families", *The Christian Science Monitor*, Alexandra Marks, November 29, 2001, July 31, 2008, < <http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/1129/p1s1-ussc.html> >

²⁵ "Subprime Mortgage Crisis", Wikipedia, July 31, 2008, < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Subprime_mortgage_crisis >

The total number of orphans worldwide is projected to reach 44 million by 2010.²⁶ A vast majority of these orphans will exist in third world countries. Deaths due to poverty and hunger, as well as war, often leave these children homeless and parentless. The AIDS epidemic is playing a huge role in the growing number of orphans. In fact, worldwide it is estimated that 15 million children under the age of 18 have been orphaned as a result of AIDS. Twelve million of these children live in Africa where the disease takes its toll daily and where it is estimated that 9 percent of all children have lost at least one parent to AIDS. By 2010 it is predicted that there will be around 15.7 million AIDS orphans in Africa.²⁷

Internationally, human rights organizations have brought to light serious neglect and cruelty in foreign orphanages— most notorious of which are orphanages in China and Russia. The Human Rights Watch investigation of one Russian orphanage revealed that children who were considered “too active” or “too difficult” were confined to dark or barren rooms. The report also uncovered that staff would tether orphans by a limb if they believed they might try to escape, and restrained others in makeshift straitjackets.²⁸ This sad reality is a clear indication of the necessity for human right organizations to monitor these institutions, and to take prompt action and intervene when necessary.

Surprisingly, adoption is still a fairly unregulated \$6.3 billion industry. Americans have, since 1971, adopted nearly 300,000 children internationally.²⁹ However, the condition of orphanages and the welfare of abandoned children is not a top priority in the current system of adoption.

Within the U.S. the number of orphans pales in comparison to third world and other international countries. Many argue that domestic processes are lengthy and costs of U.S. adoption are significant in comparison to international options. Therefore, while there are 114,000 children in the U.S. waiting to be adopted from foster care, many couples are seeking to find and adopt infants from abroad.³⁰ Of course, it doesn't help that celebrities and the media have made it appear popular to adopt international children.

In the U.S. the word “orphanages” has been largely replaced with modern facilities referred to as “group homes” or “group residential programs.” Regulated by the government, the conditions of these U.S. facilities are not a concern. What is a concern, is finding safe and permanent homes for children. Enacted in 1997, the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA) was put into place to expedite the process of moving children out of foster care and into more

²⁶ “How many orphans children live in orphanages from all over the World”, Google, July 31, 2008, <<http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview/id/134992.html> >

²⁷ “AIDS Orphans”, AVERT, July 31,2008, < <http://www.avert.org/aidsorphans.htm> >

²⁸ “The Odyssey of a Russian Orphan” , Human Rights Watch, July 31,2008, <<http://www.hrw.org/reports98/russia2/Russ98d-03.htm> >

²⁹ “How many orphans children live in orphanages from all over the World”, Google, July 31, 2008, <<http://answers.google.com/answers/threadview/id/134992.html> >

³⁰ “Overseas Babies Displace U.S. Orphans”, *Business Week*, Rita Soronen, July 31, 2008, <http://www.businessweek.com/debateroom/archives/2008/02/overseas_babies.html >

permanent, safe housing. In the three years since the law was enacted, adoption has increased 50 percent.³¹

In addition to laws that have helped progress the adoption process, Governmental organizations such as the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Child Welfare Information Gateway are working to create programs that provide a number of resources covering prevention, child welfare, abuse and neglect, adoption, search and reunion, to name a few.

Solving the Homelessness Problem

The collective efforts of individuals and corporate America have helped to make a difference in the homeless crisis in such areas as prevention, housing for the homeless, education, job training and placement. Organizations such as the National Coalition for the Homeless—a national network of people who are currently experiencing or who have experienced homelessness, activists and advocates, community-based and faith-based service providers, and others—has made significant headway in helping to end homelessness.³² Other organizations like Habitat for Humanity have engaged volunteers from all over the globe to help build houses for those in need. To date, Habitat has built more than 250,000 houses around the world, providing more than one million people in 3,000 communities with safe, decent, affordable shelter.³³

Still more needs to be done. By raising awareness of homelessness both domestically and internationally and appealing to individuals, communities and corporations to become active in the fight, change is possible.

Project 7

Project 7 is committed to “changing the score” by creating consumer goods that change people’s lives. Fifty percent of profits from Project 7 products will be donated to charities supporting one of the world’s seven critical needs including homelessness, group homes for children, and shelters for battered women and those in need.

³¹ Cornelia M. Ashby, Director Education, Workforce, and Income Security Issues “FOSTER CARE: States Focusing on Finding Permanent Homes for Children, but Long-Standing Barriers Remain”, United States General Accounting Office, April 8, 2003

³² “National Coalition for the Homeless”, National Coalition for the Homeless, July 31,2008, <
<http://www.nationalhomeless.org/> >

³³ “Habitat for Humanity Fact Sheet” , Habitat for Humanity, July 31,2008, <
<http://www.habitat.org/how/factsheet.aspx> >