

Background on Homelessness in America  
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Homelessness in America is more common than most people think. In 2013, more than 1.4 million people were homeless in shelter, and many more were homeless on the streets. To put that into perspective, consider these comparisons:

- There are about as many people experiencing homelessness in the U.S. as there are active members in the U.S. military. In other words, a world superpower has roughly the same number of people sleeping in homeless shelters as in military barracks.
- Millions of Americans play the lottery each year, and the chances of winning the lottery are about one in 175 million. Would you be surprised to know that the chances of becoming homeless are about 1 in 181 people?
- Sports stadiums are built to seat a lot of people. The nation's sheltered homeless population could fill the Daytona International Speedway 14 times; the Dallas Cowboys football stadium almost 18 times; the Washington Nationals baseball stadium more than 34 times; the Detroit Red Wings hockey stadium 71 times; or the Los Angeles Lakers basketball stadium 78 times.
- The U.S. has many populous cities. The size of the nation's sheltered homeless population is equivalent to the combined populations of Boston, Atlanta, and St. Louis.

Hard to believe. Homelessness is something that can happen to anyone, and the face of homelessness may surprise you. In 2013, there were an estimated 315,000 children experiencing homelessness in shelters, which is about 20 percent of the entire population. Most of them were with their families, but some (about 4 percent) negotiated life in the nation's shelter system alone without any adult supervision. Overall, there were about 157,000 families entering the nation's sheltered system during the year.

Homelessness also afflicts our nation's veterans—those who put on a military uniform to defend and protect our nation. In 2013, there were about 140,000 veterans who used the shelter system during the year, or about 1 in 152 veterans in the U.S. Veterans are overrepresented in the homeless population. While veterans make up only 9 percent of the U.S. adult population, veterans make up almost 13 percent of the adult homeless population.

Sheltered homelessness also cuts across every demographic characteristic. Many are members of minority groups, including 582,000 African Americans, but a large number of people in shelters are White, non-Hispanic (523,000). About 63 percent (or almost 700,000) are men, and 37 percent (or about 404,000) are women. The majority of people (633,000 or 57 percent) who experience homelessness in shelters are not battling alcohol or drug addiction, do not have a mental health issue, are not physically disabled, and do not have any other form of disability. In fact, most people who experience homelessness leave the shelter system within 30 days (58 percent).

But communities and governments are making considerable progress to ending and preventing homelessness. Homelessness among veterans and people who are long-term users of shelter—often called chronically homeless people—has declined over the past several years. Local service providers are using increasingly sophisticated approaches to assessing the needs of people and linking them to programs that best meet those needs. Communities are developing innovative practices to reducing their homeless populations, and many of these practices (e.g., the Housing First model) are also saving cities and the general public money. Federal and local governments are investing in proven strategies

based on increasingly rigorous evaluations. As noted by the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Julian Castro: “We must continue to support experimentation with new program models that create effective and sustainable solutions” (The 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress: Part 2).

Sustaining these successes will take broad support in Congress. But equally important, it will take an informed public that both recognizes the nature of this terrible social problem and demands action to end it. Ending homelessness does more than provide a roof over the heads of the nation’s most vulnerable; it restores their dignity and gives them a place to call home.