

Homelessness Myths and Facts

1. Myth: Homeless people are lazy.

Fact: There are many reasons people become homeless. The homeless community includes teenagers who have been kicked out of home or who are running away from abusive parents. It includes women escaping abusive relationships and fearing for their safety and that of their children. It includes people who are forced out of their homes due to draconic laws and regulations. It includes the working population who live in their cars or in shelters. It includes people who cannot work for health reasons. Being homeless is not easy--homeless people often spend their days trying to find a place to stay, accessing services, or finding food. It takes an enormous amount of creativity, energy, and persistence to survive.

2. Myth: Homeless people should just "get a job."

Fact: A significant portion of homeless people do have jobs—they just cannot afford to pay rent. Some receive disability income due to physical or mental problems but still cannot afford rent. For those wanting to work, the complications of applying for a job with no address, no clean clothes, no place to shower, and the stigma of being homeless (or having a criminal record) make such individuals far less competitive in the low-wage job market.

3. Myth: Many services exist for homeless people.

Fact: Services are indeed available but accessing them is difficult. Many homeless people have no idea what is available or whom to contact. Often no one is guiding them through the system; they are left alone to navigate the maze themselves. Housing providers are spread throughout the city yet homeless people often have difficulty with transportation. Even when they know who to call that contact is often unavailable. And because they don't have easy access to a telephone, homeless people often can't call back or the potential provider can't contact them.

4. Myth: Homeless people are drunks/addicts/crazy people who can't be helped.

Fact: Homeless people with substance abuse or mental health issues do not represent everyone who is homeless. Many of these people are in treatment and trying to improve their lives. Any significant recovery is impossible without a safe, stable home life. As a result, many who successfully complete treatment relapse. Stability in housing is critical in the success of any treatment model. Only about 20-40% of homeless have a substance abuse issue and one-third, at most, have a serious mental illness.

5. Myth: It is easy to identify homeless people.

Fact: Everyone is capable of making a contribution to society, but many people lack the opportunity to prove themselves due to the stigma attached to homelessness. There are many people you would never suspect are homeless as they look and act similarly to the average person. They may have been teachers, lawyers, accountants, and so on, who were, at some

point in their lives, well-respected members of society. There are also the working poor who barely make enough money for food and live in their cars or sleep on someone's couch. These people often have a hard time getting the help they need because they fear the stigma attached to homelessness or they are turned away by service providers because they do not look as though they need help. Often, these "hidden homeless" fall through the cracks until their situation worsens to the point where they develop serious mental health or addiction issues.

6. Myth: Homeless people are not my responsibility.

Fact: Homeless people are part of your community. In fact, surveys have shown 70 to 80 percent of homeless persons are from the local area or lived there for a year or longer before becoming homeless. Every one of us is responsible for the community where we live. If we start a healthy dialogue between members of the community, together we can build the kind of community in which we all want to live.

7. Myth: Homeless people are dangerous and violent.

Fact: Homeless persons are far more likely to be the victims of violence than the perpetrators. Of course, some homeless individuals may commit acts of violence beyond self-defense but such acts rarely affect the non-homeless individuals they encounter. To put it another way, any violence by homeless persons is either self-defense or due to the rare violent perpetrator who preys on other homeless people.

8. Myth: Homeless people are criminals.

Fact: Homeless persons *are* more likely to have criminal justice intervention. However, this is primarily because many of their daily survival activities are criminalized—meaning they might be given a summons or arrested for minor offenses such as trespassing, littering, or loitering.

9. Myth: Homeless people prefer the freedom of life on the street.

Fact: There is no evidence to support this notion that homeless persons are “service resistant.” Since “Housing First” began in New York City in 1992 at the nonprofit Pathways to Housing, Inc., it became clear that the offer of immediate access to independent housing with support services is welcomed and accepted by most homeless. People on the street often reject the option of crowded, unsafe shelters—not housing in general.

10. Myth: Homeless people spend all their money on drugs and alcohol.

Fact: Interviews with street homeless persons show that most of their money goes to buying food and amenities such as socks, hygiene products, and bottled water. Although some do spend money on alcohol or drugs, the same can be said of anyone.