

Explainer



Questions and Answers on Homelessness Policy and Research

Why is Homelessness an Important Issue?

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Homelessness is one of our nation's most misunderstood and vexing social problems. In January 2005, according to the most recent data available, an estimated 744,313 people experienced homelessness.¹ Homelessness does not discriminate. Families with children, single adults, teenagers, and elderly individuals of all races struggle with the devastating effects of homelessness. Homelessness exists across the country, in small rural towns, suburban neighborhoods, and large metropolises.

The primary cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing. Over 5 million low-income households have serious housing problems due to high housing costs, substandard housing conditions, or both.² While the problem of homelessness seems daunting, we can end homelessness in our nation. The goal may seem bold, but it is achievable.

What is Being Done Nationally and Locally?

In 2000, the National Alliance to End Homelessness released *A Plan, Not a Dream: How to End Homelessness in Ten Years*, which outlined key strategies drawn from research and innovative programs from across the country. Since the release of this blueprint, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the President endorsed the goal of planning to end chronic homelessness in ten years and the US Interagency Council on Homelessness (USICH) challenged 100 cities to create plans to end homelessness. To date, 300 communities have undertaken efforts to end homelessness and more than 100 communities have completed plans to end homelessness. Most plans focus on ending homelessness among all populations—chronic, families, youth, veterans, and the elderly.³

These efforts have started to show results. Cities and counties across the country have begun to see reductions in homelessness:

- From 2002 to 2005, chronic homelessness in San Francisco dropped 28 percent.⁴
- The number of families in shelter in Westchester County, New York declined by 57 percent—

from 690 families in 2002 to 297 families in 2006.⁵

- From 2000 to 2004, the number of families experiencing homelessness declined by 43 percent in Hennepin County, Minnesota.⁶

What Further Action is Needed?

While much is being done, further federal, state, and local action is needed to end homelessness. The federal government needs to significantly expand affordable housing programs, particularly the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher Program. Once back in housing, links to mainstream services—for example, mental health counseling, child development services such as HeadStart, or employment training—are important for building strong households that are no longer at risk of homelessness. Other federal programs, including child care subsidies, child support enforcement, TANF assistance, Medicaid, and the Earned Income Tax Credit, also play key roles in ending and preventing homelessness.

About the National Alliance to End Homelessness

The National Alliance to End Homelessness is a nonpartisan, mission-driven organization committed to preventing and ending homelessness in the United States. The Alliance is a leading voice on the issue of homelessness. The Alliance analyzes policy and develops pragmatic, cost-effective policy solutions. We work collaboratively with the public, private, and nonprofit sectors to build state and local capacity, leading to stronger programs and policies that help communities achieve their goals of ending homelessness. We provide data and research to policymakers and elected officials in order to inform policy debates and educate the public and opinion leaders nationwide.

For more information on The National Alliance to End Homelessness, visit www.endhomelessness.org.

Endnotes

¹ Cunningham, Mary and Meghan Henry. 2007. Homelessness Counts. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

² Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). 2003. Affordable Housing Needs: A Report to Congress on the Significant Need for Housing. Washington, D.C. Office of Policy Development and Research."

³ Cunningham et al. 2006. A New Vision: What is in Community Plans to End Homelessness? Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

⁴ National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2005. Community Snapshot: San Francisco. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

⁵ National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2007. Community Snapshot: Westchester Count, NY. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

⁶ National Alliance to End Homelessness. 2005. Community Snapshot: Hennepin County. Washington, DC: National Alliance to End Homelessness.

The National Alliance to End Homelessness' **Explainer Series** answers common and frequent questions about homelessness policy and research. This series draws on the best expertise, data, and research available. For more information about homelessness, please visit www.endhomelessness.org.