

Rural Homelessness

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Homelessness is often assumed to be an urban phenomenon because homeless people are more numerous, more geographically concentrated, and more visible in urban areas. However, people experience the same difficulties associated with homelessness and housing distress in America's small towns and rural areas as they do in urban areas. Problems defining, locating, and sampling have made enumerating the homeless population with certainty virtually impossible with estimates commonly relying on counts of persons using services that are inaccessible. Some of what has been learned in recent years about the causes, consequences, and strategies for combating homelessness in rural areas is summarized below. Resources for further study are also provided.

DEFINITIONS AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Understanding rural homelessness requires a more flexible definition of homelessness. There are far fewer shelters in rural areas than in urban areas; therefore, people experiencing homelessness are less likely to live on the street or in a shelter and more likely to live in a car or camper, or with relatives in overcrowded or substandard housing. Restricting definitions of homelessness to include only those who are literally homeless - that is, on the streets or in shelters - does not fit well with the rural reality, and also may exclude many rural communities from accessing federal dollars to address homelessness.

Rural is typically defined in contrast to urban. The most commonly used definitions are based on population density and proximity to metropolitan areas such as those developed by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). Prior to 2003, OMB defined a "metropolitan community" as a population nucleus with a population of 50,000 or more and the economically tied surrounding area; communities with more than 5,000 but fewer than 50,000 people were designated as "urban clusters." Rural areas constitute all "territory, population, and housing units not classified as urban" (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005).

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act defines a homeless person as, "(1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence; and (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is-(A) 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); (B) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or (C) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings." This definition has created an atmosphere in which most rural communities do not count persons living in rural substandard structures as homeless, leaving a portion of those who are homeless in rural areas unidentified while their counterparts are being counted in urban communities.

Studies comparing urban and rural homeless populations have shown that homeless people in rural areas are more likely to be white, female, married, currently working, homeless for the first time, and homeless for a shorter period of time (Fisher, 2005). Other research indicates that families, single mothers, and children make up the largest group of people who are homeless in rural areas (Vissing, 1996). Homelessness among Native Americans and migrant workers is also largely a rural phenomenon. Findings also include higher rates of domestic violence and lower rates of alcohol and substance abuse. About 9% of all homeless people live in rural areas (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2007). Estimates of the total number of homeless people in the United States vary widely and, therefore, so do estimates of the rural homeless. Using the National Alliance's 2007 study, there are around 750,000 people homeless on any given night. Therefore, around 70,000 people in rural areas are homeless on each night in the United States (2007 National Symposium on Homeless Research).

CAUSES

Rural homelessness, like urban homelessness, is the result of poverty and a lack of affordable housing. In 2005, research shows that the odds of being poor are between 1.2 to 2.3 times higher for people in nonmetropolitan areas, than in metropolitan areas. One in five nonmetro counties is classified as a high poverty county (defined as having a poverty rate of 20% or higher), while only one in twenty metro counties are defined as high poverty (Fisher, 2005). Furthermore, in 2005, 15.1 percent of rural Americans were living in poverty compared with 12.5 percent of non-rural Americans (Jensen, 2006). Rural homelessness is most pronounced in rural regions that are primarily agricultural; regions whose economies are based on declining extractive industries such as mining, timber, or fishing; and regions experiencing economic growth -- for example, areas with industrial plants that attract more workers than jobs available, and areas near urban centers that attract new businesses and higher income residents, thereby driving up taxes and living expenses (Aron and Fitchen, 1996).

It has been show that fewer job opportunities, lower wages, and longer periods of unemployment also plague the rural poor more often than their urban counterparts (Bread for the World Institute, 2005). A lack of decent affordable housing underlies both rural and urban homelessness. While housing costs are lower in rural areas, so are rural incomes, leading to similarly high rent burdens. Problems of housing quality also contribute to rural homelessness: in rural areas, 30% of nonmetro households, or 6.2 million households, have at least one major housing problem (Housing Assistance Council, 2002). Rural residential histories reveal that homelessness is often precipitated by a structural or physical housing problem jeopardizing health or safety; when families relocate to safer housing, the rent is often too much to manage and they experience homelessness again while searching for housing that is both safe and affordable. Other trends affecting rural homelessness include the distance between low-cost housing and employment opportunities, lack of transportation, decline in homeownership, restrictive land-use regulations and housing codes, rising rent burdens, and insecure tenancy resulting from changes in the local real estate market (for example, the displacement of trailer park residents) (Fitchen, 1992).

POLICY ISSUES

Efforts to end rural homelessness are complicated by isolation, lack of awareness, and lack of resources. Helpful initiatives would include broadening the definition of homelessness to include those in temporary and/or dilapidated facilities, increasing outreach to isolated areas, and increasing networking and awareness on a national level. Ultimately, however, ending homelessness in rural areas requires jobs that pay a living wage, adequate income supports for those who cannot work, affordable housing, access to health care, and transportation.

RESOURCES

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