Defining Homelessness

When asked the number of homeless people in the United States, the National Coalition for the Homeless responds that "there is no easy answer to this question and, in fact, the question itself is misleading." Because homelessness tends to be a temporary circumstance, it is more effective to look at the number of people who experience homelessness over a period of time rather than how many people are homeless at a given moment.

The National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty estimates that about 3.5 million people, including 1.35 million children, experience homelessness in America each year (NLCH 2007).

Sexual Assault

Sexual Assault is a general term that includes sexual harassment, unwanted sexual contact, child sexual abuse, incest, and rape. Sexual contact becomes assault when a person is unable to or does not consent to an activity.

Rape is a crime of aggression, power, and control in which one person forces, coerces, or manipulates another person to have sexual intercourse without their consent. Rape includes vaginal, oral, or anal penetration by any object (including fingers) and also includes forced oral sex.

Rape and sexual assault are crimes. Even if you know the person, you trusted the person, you have had sex before, you didn’t fight back, it happened a long time ago, or you were under the influence of drugs or alcohol, sex without your consent is rape. It is wrong and it is illegal.

Sexual Violence and Homelessness

While there is no causal relationship between sexual violence and homelessness, sexual abuse increases an individual’s probability of becoming homeless, and homelessness increases the risk of sexual victimization.

- 92% of homeless mothers have experienced severe physical and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives. (Brown and Bassuk, 1997)
- 43% of homeless mothers reported experiencing sexual abuse in childhood, and 63% reported intimate partner violence as adults. (Brown and Bassuk, 1997)
- A study of over 2,500 homeless individuals found that 9.4% of women, 1.4% of men, and 11.9% of transgender persons had been sexually assaulted in the previous year. (Kushel, Evans, Perry et al, 2003)
- In a survey of homeless youth between ages 13 and 21, 23% of females and 11% of males had experienced sexual victimization on at least one occasion since being on the street. (Tyler, et al. 2004)
- 61% of homeless girls and 16% of homeless boys reported having been sexually abused before leaving home. (Estes and Weiner, 2001)
- Some (though certainly not all) child sexual abuse survivors may find it difficult to trust others, which leads them to develop fewer of the supportive relationships necessary to avoid homelessness. (Bassuk, 1993)
More Facts and Figures

- Estimates indicate that half of all homeless women and children have become homeless while trying to escape abusive situations. (Browne and Bassuk, 1997)
- 84% of women who rely on prostitution for income report current or past homelessness. (Farley and Barkan, 1998)
- Compared to low-income women who have housing, the sexual assault experiences of homeless women are more likely to be violent and include multiple sexual acts. (Stermac and Paradis, 2001)
- Homeless women who had experienced either physical or sexual violence in the past month were three times more likely to report drug or alcohol abuse (24.3%) than homeless women who were not victimized (7.9%). (Wenzel, Leake, and Gelberg, 2000)
- Severe mental illness appears to be related to both homelessness and victimization. In one study of individuals who had a mental illness and were homeless, 97% of subjects had experienced violent victimization at some point in their lives. (Goodman, Johnson, Dutton, Harris, 1997).
- Homeless women are more likely to have substance abuse problems than low-income women who have housing. (Wenzel et al, 2004) Substance abuse may put women at greater risk for victimization. (Goodman, 2006)

Sex Offenders and Homelessness

- Two-thirds of states allow sex offenders to register as homeless or list a shelter or inexact location as their address if they stay in touch with the police. (Koch, Wendy. “Many sex offenders are often homeless.” USA Today. 18 Nov 2007)
- More than a dozen states have hundreds of convicted offenders without specific addresses. California alone lists 2,716 offenders as “transient.” (ibid)
- Sex offenders have limited housing options and struggle to find landlords who will rent to a registered sex offender. (Burchfield and Mingus, 2008)
- An Australian study of individuals who re-offend found that offenders attribute their recidivism to unemployment, homelessness, and lack of family support. (Department of Family and Community Studies, Australia, 2004).
- Stable housing is important in preventing repeat offenses. Every time an individual on parole moves, his or her likelihood for re-arrest increases 25%. (Meredith, Speir, Johnson, and Hull, 2003)
- Residency restrictions are strongly correlated with an increase in homelessness among sex offenders. In the year following California’s passage of Proposition 83 (which prohibits sex offenders from living within 2,000 feet of schools or parks), the number of sex offenders registering as transient increased 60%. (California Sex Offender Management Board, 2008)

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