

# Fact Checker National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS

Accurate Statistics on Homelessness

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## Rural Homelessness

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America's small towns and communities are not immune to the problem of homelessness. The number of people who experience rural homelessness is unknown, but the last national count of homeless people found that 9 percent live in rural areas.<sup>1</sup>

Advocates and researchers often refer to people who experience rural homelessness as the “hidden homeless.” Many rural homeless people live in places we do not see; they often are sleeping in the woods, campgrounds, cars, abandoned farm buildings, or other places not intended for habitation. Many more individuals and families in rural areas live in substandard housing or are doubled up. These households are at risk of homelessness.

The same structural factors that contribute to urban homelessness—lack of affordable housing and inadequate income—also lead to rural homelessness. Historically, the greatest housing concern for rural Americans has been poor housing quality. There have been significant improvements in rural housing quality over the past several years; however, the fact remains that approximately 1.5 million (6.6 percent) rural homes are substandard according to the 2003 American Housing Survey.<sup>2</sup> Residents in substandard housing are often forced to seek safer, more expensive housing that they are unable to afford. As a result, poor-quality housing can lead to periods of homelessness.

Insufficient income, high rates of poverty, and unemployment also lead to rural homelessness. Rural homelessness is most dramatic in areas that

experience high economic growth, thus driving up housing costs, and in areas with high rates of unemployment because of declining industries, such as farming, timber, mining, or fishing.<sup>3</sup> The lack of available jobs and steady incomes means that household income is significantly lower in rural areas; according to the latest report by the U.S. Census Bureau, the median income for households living in non-metropolitan areas was \$37,564, compared to \$48,474 for metropolitan areas.

Poverty is a persistent problem in rural America. The national poverty rate is 12.6 percent, whereas the poverty rate in rural areas is 14.5 percent,<sup>4</sup> and 189 of the 200 poorest counties are rural.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most staggering is the problem of child poverty. More than 19 percent of rural children live in poverty (an increase of over 3 percent from 2000).<sup>6</sup>

One of the key differences between rural and urban homelessness is a lower capacity in the homeless service provider infrastructure in rural areas as opposed to urban areas. Additionally, homeless people in rural areas tend to be homeless for shorter periods of time and are less likely to have health insurance and access to medical care.<sup>7</sup> As noted earlier, other predictors of homelessness, such as substance abuse and mental illness, contribute to rural homelessness. Those who experience rural homelessness report higher rates of alcohol abuse and domestic violence, but lower rates of mental illness and drug abuse than the urban homeless population.<sup>8</sup> However, more recent research suggests that, when looking at substance use trends for the *entire* population, there is no difference in reported substance abuse between rural and urban residents.<sup>9</sup>

There are numerous barriers to serving rural homeless people, including a negligible amount of available affordable housing, limited transportation methods, and that federal priorities and programs

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tend to be awarded in criteria that favor urban areas.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, because rural areas face persistent poverty, a high number of people are continually at-risk of homelessness.

Due to the before mentioned barriers, one of the most important strategies in ending rural homelessness is prevention. Preventing the occurrence of homelessness is the most economic way of ending homelessness. For communities that have limited funding providing people at risk of homelessness with prevention services, such as paying back rent or utilities and case management, can significantly decrease the number of people moving into homelessness.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Burt, M.R., Aron, L.Y., Douglas, T., Valente, J., Lee, E., and Iwen, B. 1999. *Homelessness: Programs and the People they Serve, Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients Technical Report*. Urban Institute. Washington, DC: Interagency Council on the Homeless.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Census Bureau and United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Aron, L.Y., and Fitchen, J.M. 1996. "Rural Homelessness: A Synopsis." *Homelessness in America* (Jim Baumohl, ed.). Phoenix, AZ: Oryx Press.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Census Bureau and United States Department of Housing and Urban Development. 2004. *American Housing Survey for the United States: 2003*. Washington, DC. Available at <http://www.census.gov/prod/2004pubs/H150-03.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Housing Assistance Council. 2002. *Taking Stock: Rural People, Poverty, and Housing at the turn of the 21st Century*. Washington, DC. Available at <http://www.ruralhome.org/pubs/hsganalysis/ts2000/1TSfrontice.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Carsey Institute. 2006. *Child Poverty in Rural America: New Data Shows Increases in 41 States*. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire

<sup>7</sup> Kudlowitz, Mark. "Rural Homelessness: Challenges and Strategies." Workshop presentation, 2006 National Alliance to End Homelessness Annual Conference, Washington, DC, July 17, 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Burt, M.R., Aron, L.Y., Douglas, T., Valente, J., Lee, E., and Iwen, B. 1999. *Homelessness: Programs and the People they Serve, Findings of the National Survey of Homeless Assistance Providers and Clients Technical Report*. Urban Institute. Washington, DC: Interagency Council on the Homeless.

<sup>9</sup> Van Gundy K. 2006. *Substance Abuse in Rural and Small Town America*. Carsey Institute. Durham, NH: University of Hew Hampshire.

<sup>10</sup> Myers, Diana. "Sight Unseen: The Neglected Problem of Rural Homelessness." Workshop Presentation, 2005 National Alliance to End Homelessness Annual Conference, Washington, DC, July 12, 2005.