Homelessness in the United States

Summary of the original Sector Report: Scripture Ministry and Homelessness in the United States
Introduction

God calls on his people to care for those in need. This call is voiced throughout the Scriptures, as God’s concern for and identification with the poor and homeless resound in passage after passage. The Sector Report, Scripture Ministry and Homelessness in the United States, attempts to better define and explain the principle causes and contributing factors that lead to homelessness. It suggests strategies by which the needs of the homeless population can be met through the Scriptures and Bible-based materials.\(^i\)

Overview of Homelessness

The most comprehensive information that contains data on homelessness is from September 2008, so it does not include the growing numbers of people impacted by the more recent economic crisis.

The generally accepted definition of homelessness in the United States is a person sleeping in a shelter or transitional housing or a place not designed for human habitation.\(^ii\)

The term *sheltered* describes a homeless person who is in an emergency shelter or
transitional housing program.iii *Unsheltered* refers to a person living in a place not designed for human habitation.

Within the overall homeless population are different subgroups, each with varying factors contributing to people’s situations. Many homeless families include an adult and at least one child,ix but the majority of homeless people are adults or unaccompanied youth (those under 18).v An extensive 1998 study found that each year, 5 percent (1.6 million) of the total youth population in the United States experience an episode of homelessness.vi Youth homelessness is most often due to abuse or neglect within the family. Research shows that between 40 percent and 60 percent of homeless youth has been physically abused.vii Youth who are homeless and unaccompanied are especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation.

The term *chronically homeless* refers to those who have experienced repeated episodes of homelessness or have been homeless for several years.viii The 2008 Point in Time count (an annual count of homeless persons conducted in a single night in January) estimates that this subgroup represents 30 percent of all homeless individuals.ix

Approximately 2 million people experienced homelessness in the United States between Oct. 1, 2007, and Sept. 30, 2008, based on data from the 2008 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR).x The majority of the people in the homeless population change from year to year. From 2007 to 2008, family homelessness grew by 9 percent, an increase of 43,000 people, due to the economic crisis in the United States. The share of people in families who are sheltered increased from 29 percent to 32 percent (AHAR).xi The increase in foreclosures and poverty from the recession contributed to the rise in family homelessness. In 2008, studies showed that 5 percent to 10 percent of homelessness was due to property foreclosure.xii Since the recession, the National Alliance to End Homelessness estimates that in 2009 and 2010, an additional 1.5 million people became homeless.xiii
Historically, the majority of homeless people live in urban areas. The 2008 Point in Time count found that five states contain more than half of all homeless people in the United States:

- California, 157,277 homeless people
- New York, 61,125
- Florida, 50,158
- Texas, 40,190
- Michigan, 28,248

Some 20 percent of homeless people were located in three cities: New York City, Los Angeles and Detroit (2008 Point in Time study). However, the number of homeless people in rural and suburban areas has also been on the rise since the recession. The share of the sheltered homeless population in principal urban areas fell from 77 percent in 2007 to 68 percent in 2008 – while the share in suburban and rural areas increased from 23 percent to 32 percent.

**Demographic Characteristics**

**Gender:** Some 64 percent of all sheltered homeless people in 2008 were male, and 36 percent were female. Men are overrepresented in the homeless population, as they constitute only 48.7 percent of the overall population. The growing gap in unemployment insurance coverage may affect more poor men than poor women, as poor women are more likely to be caring for children and are thus eligible for other social safety nets. Men are more likely than women to exhibit characteristics related to homelessness, such as higher rates of substance abuse and incarceration.

**Age:** Most sheltered homeless people in 2008 were 31 years old or older. Specifically:

- 20.4 percent were under age 18
- 22.5 percent were between 18 and 30
- 40.3 percent were between ages 31 and 50
• 14 percent were between 51 and 61
• 2.8 percent were 62 or older²⁹

Those ages 31 to 50 are overrepresented in the sheltered homeless population, with 40.3 percent of sheltered homeless population compared to 29 percent of the total U.S. population.²⁰

**Race/Ethnicity:** In 2008, most sheltered homeless persons were minorities. Specifically:
• 41.7 percent were black
• 37.9 percent were white (non-Hispanic)
• 11.6 percent were Hispanic/Latino
• 8.8 percent were other or mixed-race

African Americans are overrepresented in the homeless population relative to the U.S. population as a whole (41.7 percent of the sheltered homeless population compared to 12.4 percent of the total U.S. population).²¹

**Causes and contributing factors**

The following are some of the causes of homelessness in the United States, as well as the contributing factors.

**Poverty and lack of affordable housing:** Unaffordable housing and desperate poverty constitute a primary cause of homelessness. In both the 2007 and 2008 surveys of U.S. cities by the Conference of Mayors, a majority of cities named a lack of affordable housing as the primary cause of homelessness in their areas.²²

**Severe mental illness:** About 26 percent of homeless people in the United States suffer from a severe mental illness, compared to just 6 percent of the overall population.²³ In a 2008 survey, reports from 25 cities cited mental illness as the third-largest cause of
homelessness for homeless adults in their areas. In families, mental illness was only mentioned by 12 percent of the cities as one of the main causes of homelessness.\textsuperscript{xxiv}

**Substance abuse problems:** In 2007, some 37 percent of sheltered individual adults were chronic substance abusers, compared to 10 percent of adults in families.\textsuperscript{xxv} Mental health and substance abuse issues are often found together. The most common causes of homelessness among single individuals are mental illness combined with substance abuse, according to the 2007 U.S. Conference of Mayors survey.\textsuperscript{xxvi}

**Disability:** While only 17.7 percent of the U.S. population has a disability, 42.8 percent of sheltered homeless adults in 2008 were disabled.\textsuperscript{xxvii} It can be more difficult for persons with disabilities to obtain work and access to permanent housing. Safety nets for the disabled, such as Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and Social Security Disability Income (SSDI), have been shown to be largely inadequate for those relying wholly on such safety nets.\textsuperscript{xxviii}

**Domestic violence:** About 63 percent of all homeless women have been victims of domestic violence.\textsuperscript{xxix} In 2008, about one third of families were homeless because of domestic violence. Cities participating in the U.S. Conference of Mayors Survey cited domestic violence as the second-largest cause of family homelessness, following affordable housing.\textsuperscript{xxx} Further, the role of domestic violence as a contributor to homelessness is probably underreported.

**HIV/AIDS:** According to the 2008 Point in Time count, 4 percent of sheltered individuals were living with HIV/AIDS. Thus, the HIV/AIDS rate among sheltered homeless individuals is 10 times the rate of the entire U.S. population (0.4%).\textsuperscript{xxxi} Due to their precarious health and financial status – combined with the high cost of healthcare and the high chance of job loss – half of the people living with HIV/AIDS in the United States are at risk of becoming homeless, according to the National Alliance to End Homelessness.\textsuperscript{xxxii}
Institutionalization: Individuals are 5.7 times more likely to enter a shelter coming from an institution than the overall population. In 2008, 13.6 percent of individuals entering the shelter system were coming directly from an institutional environment.xxxiii Specifically:

- 7.6 percent of all individual adults accessing shelters came from a psychiatric unit or substance abuse center
- 5.6 percent came from a jail, prison or juvenile detention center.xxxiv

This data shows the problems around discharge planning.xxxv

War/conflict trauma: Veterans constitute about 12 percent of sheltered homeless adults in 2008. However, between 150,000 and 200,000 veterans are homeless on any given night, constituting between 20 and 25 percent of the total homeless population.xxxvi Most homeless veterans are single and from poor communities. Some 50 percent to 76 percent have substance abuse problems; 45 percent suffer from some form of mental illness.xxxvii

Services for intervention and prevention

Services focused on homelessness include government agencies, nonprofit organizations and faith-based initiatives. Representatives of these groups conduct research, implement programs and advocate for the homeless population. Programs often provide emergency shelter, transitional housing, supported permanent housing, meals, substance abuse recovery, job training, counseling and case management.

Government agencies include the Interagency Council on Homelessness, the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and Veterans Affairs.

In the non-profit sector, there are advocacy organizations and service providers. Some of the major advocacy organizations include the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the Urban Institute and the National Coalition for the Homeless. Some of the service-
providing organizations include The Salvation Army, Volunteers of America and
Association of Gospel Rescue Missions. Catholic charities, church-based programs and
many food pantries and soup kitchens also help the homeless population.

**Scripture materials**

When providing funding or Scripture-based materials to the homeless population,
American Bible Society (ABS) should partner with established agencies and programs
already ministering to the homeless. To be effective, ABS should work through existing
relationships, such as the Association of Gospel Rescue Missions and The Salvation
Army. It should form new strategic partnerships, focusing initially on areas with large
homeless populations, such as New York City, Detroit and Los Angeles. Many homeless
ministries and service providers are stretched for resources, especially in their spiritual
programs. The need is much greater than the capacity to address it. Thus, free donations
of Scripture-based materials may be an appropriate way for ABS to help. ABS should
consider creating a special fund for homeless Scripture ministry, advertised on its website
and elsewhere.

As far as the actual Scripture material itself, it must meet the needs of the extremely
diverse homeless population. Appropriate Scripture materials and delivery methods will
vary according to an individual’s needs. ABS must consider style issues, such as the need
for material in Spanish, large print and lightweight and water-resistant materials. The
content should stand alone, without dependence on pastoral guidance. And the Scripture
passages should be relevant and meaningful.

**Best practices**

The following best practices are based on research by Global Scripture Impact.

**Dignity and respect.** Those experiencing homelessness must be approached and treated
with dignity and respect as human beings created by God. When a person is in a situation
that negatively impacts their own sense of self-worth, such as the degradation and
hardship of homelessness, it is important to recognize each person as a valuable individual.

**Make no assumptions.** Reserve judgment and pegging individuals as having certain issues or coming from a certain background. Do not jump to conclusions about a person because of their housing situation.

**Relationally oriented.** Many homeless persons deal with broken relationships and isolation, especially those struggling with substance abuse and mental illness. Broken relationships are often a contributing factor for homeless individuals, such as youth, families and individual adults. Service providers must help develop relationships with homeless people so they learn how to be in healthy relationships and can move forward with a firm support base.

**Holistic, individualized approach.** Just as the causes of homelessness are diverse, so too are the needs of those experiencing homelessness. Ministries should attempt to meet the needs of the whole person – spiritual, psychological and physical needs. The right approach to serving each person is different, but they should all be relationship-based, which often requires one-on-one attention.

**Meet basic needs (usually first).** Attempting to meet someone’s spiritual, psychological or addiction-related needs before meeting their immediate physical needs can be a wasted effort. When a person has been cared for physically, their attention is more available for addressing other deep needs, such as psychological and spiritual.

**Long-term community development approach.** Many of the solutions to homelessness relate to community development in general. Addressing emergency needs is important, but a goal of prevention and quick response is crucial for systemic change. As poverty is so intertwined with the issues of homelessness, it is important to address the health of the community as a whole.
Grace, flexibility and patience. Most people experiencing homelessness are in a state of crisis. Some have just lost their homes, while some are struggling with ongoing mental health or addiction-related crises. Some might be fleeing violence in their homes, while others may be struggling with emotional and spiritual damage from broken relationships, rejection or personal failures.
Footnotes

i This entire report derives from a more in-depth Sector Report prepared by Global Scripture Impact in November 2009 for American Bible Society
ii National Alliance to End Homelessness (Aug. 14, 2007)
iii Ibid
iv United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (July 2009)
v Ibid
vi National Alliance to End Homelessness (Oct. 30, 2009)
vii National Alliance to End Homelessness (Aug. 3, 2009)
viii United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (May 27, 2009)
ix United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (July 2009)
x 2009 AHAR data covering the period Oct. 1, 2008 to Sept. 30, 2009
xi National Alliance to End Homelessness (Aug.6, 2009)
xii Eckholm
xiii National Alliance to End Homelessness (Jan. 14, 2009)
xiv United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (July 2009)
xv Ibid
xvi Ibid
xvii Ibid
xviii Ibid
xix Ibid
xx Ibid
xxi Ibid
xxii United States Conference of Mayors (Dec 2007)
xxiii National Coalition for the Homeless (July 2009)
xxiv United States Conference of Mayors (2008)
xxv United States Conference of Mayors (2007)
xxvi Ibid
xxvii United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (July 2009)
xxviii Ibid
xxix Browne
xxx United States Conference of Mayors (2007)
xxxi United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (July 2009)
xxii National Alliance to End Homelessness (Aug. 10, 2006)
xxiii United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (July 2009)
xxiv Ibid
xxv National Alliance to End Homelessness (Aug. 6, 2009)
xxvi National Alliance to End Homelessness “Veterans”
xxvii National Coalition for Homeless Veterans