

AN ANALYSIS OF HOMELESSNESS IN UNITED STATES OF AMERICA: POLICY IMPLICATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the perceived causes of homelessness in United States of America, characteristics of homelessness in United States of America by family types, percentage of people experiencing homelessness by community setting to assist policymakers to develop programs and policy frameworks to address homeless issues across the country (USA). Homelessness affects the entire country. Homelessness is not someone else's issue but national in scope. The issue of homelessness has a ripple effect throughout the community. It impacts the availability of healthcare resources, crime and safety, the workforce, and the use of tax dollars. Further, homelessness impacts the present as well as the future growth of the nation. Above all, the knowledge of homelessness benefits all of us to break the cycle of homelessness, one person, one family at a time. Therefore, in order to assist policymakers to effectively tackle the issue of homelessness, the study adopted a descriptive research design to analyze the policy issue of homelessness in United States of America. The data source for the study analysis came from the 2021 Census data, the 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS. The study revealed that most of the homeless peoples were individuals without families and children (i.e. 70 percent), and the rest were people living in families with children. Also, the study further revealed in the homelessness dataset that males are far more likely to experience homelessness than their female counterparts. That is, out of every 10,000 males, 22 are homeless (representing a total male homeless population of 352,211), while for women and girls, that number is 13 homeless (representing a total female homeless population of 223,578). In addition, the homelessness historical data revealed that marginalized groups are more likely to be disadvantaged within housing and homelessness spheres. It also revealed that higher unemployment rates, lower incomes, less access to healthcare, and higher incarceration rates are some of the likely factors that contribute to higher rates of homelessness among people of color, and marginalized groups. Also, historically marginalized racial groups are far more likely to experience homelessness as a result of segregation and discrimination in employment and housing, among other things. The study strongly recommends that the federal government should create more programs and employment opportunities that will give equal opportunities to all. The study further recommends that by taking into consideration programs that will create more affordable houses, and to also take care of both natural shocks (i.e. hurricanes, fire outbreaks, etc.), and human shocks (i.e. domestic abuse) will go a long way to help the country minimize the homelessness rate.

Keywords: Homelessness, Marginalized, Housing, Sheltered, Policymakers, Discrimination, Unsheltered, Poverty, Unemployment, Programs

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INTRODUCTION

Homelessness is a growing concern to policymakers globally. Homelessness, which is also known as a state of being unsheltered or unsheltered – is the condition of lacking stable, safe, and functional housing (Hanson-Easey et al., 2016). According to Hanson-Easey et al. (2016), people can be categorized as homeless if they are: (a) living on the streets, also known as sleeping rough (primary homelessness); (b) moving between temporary shelters, including houses of friends, family, and emergency accommodation (secondary homelessness); and (c) living in private boarding houses without a private bathroom or security of tenure (tertiary homelessness).

Additionally, it was also used to refer as a situation whereby a person has no permanent house or place to live safely or referred to as an internally displaced persons, persons compelled to leave their places of domicile, who remain as refugees within their country's borders (Hanson-Easey et al., 2016).

Homelessness is mainly assumed to be an urban problem since most homeless people accumulate in urban areas (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Meanwhile, people living in American small towns and rural areas also experience challenges linked to homelessness just as much as those in urban areas (Rollinson & Pardeck, 2018). Since there are relatively fewer shelters in rural areas, people experiencing homelessness in such areas are more likely to stay in a car or live with relatives in substandard and overcrowded housing. Rural areas are generally areas and populations not classified as urban areas. The US Census Bureau (2020) defines an urban place as an area with a population of at least 2500 people within its boundary. Therefore, any area with a population below 2500 is classified as a rural place (U.S. Census Bureaus, 2020).

Rural homelessness, just like urban homelessness, is caused by poverty and the inability to afford decent housing (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Studies indicate that people living in rural places are 2.3 times more likely to suffer from homelessness-related difficulties than their counterparts in urban locations (Rollinson & Pardeck, 2018). Additionally, rural homelessness is more prevalent in agricultural areas whose economies depend on declining extractive industries such as fishing, mining, or timber (Yousey & Samudra, 2018). Rural homelessness is further amplified by the more extended periods of unemployment, low wages, and fewer job opportunities (Fitzpatrick, 2012). Therefore, while the cost of housing is relatively lower in the rural areas, the level of income in such regions is equally low, leading to high rent burdens.

As a result, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has over the years invested in transitional housing programs to help homeless individuals (Burt, 2006). Burt (2006) underscored in the literature that the move came after the enactment of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987. Even though the transitional housing programs were meant to offer accommodation services to homeless individuals for a maximum of 24 months as they transition to stable housing (Burt, 2010). Such homes did accommodate women, children, different racial groups, etc. primarily with little emphasis on transitional programs that could assist policymakers to develop programs to aid in the quantification of the total and the demographic distribution of homeless persons (Burt, 2010). Statistically, data reveal that up to 58% of individuals housed in transitional homes have been homeless only once, while 20% have been homeless up to three or more times (Johnson & Zhu, 2017). Additionally, the data further reveal that at least 27% of homeless person have children but lack clarity on the ethnic distribution, educational levels, religious, and occupational dimensions among the homeless persons (Johnson & Zhu, 2017). Meanwhile, it was observed from the literature that after the 24 months has elapsed, the families are supposed to be sheltered adequately in stable housing, but as to whether there exist adequate programs help these families to shelter adequately in stable housing are yet to be addressed or find out in the literature which could be due to lack of current study to reveal the perceived causes of homelessness in United States of America, characteristics of homelessness in United States of America by family types, percentage of people experiencing homelessness by community setting to assist policymakers to develop programs and policy frameworks to address homeless issues across the country (USA). There is no doubt that there exist several gaps in addressing homelessness issues in the literature, for which one target the fact that there are insufficient statistics from previous studies to quantify the population of homeless persons, especially families with children, different racial groups, and there are also not many proposed clear policy frameworks for tackling the issue. Therefore, this study is designed to analyze the perceived causes of homelessness in United States of America, characteristics of homelessness in United States of America by family types, percentage of people experiencing homelessness by community setting to assist policymakers to develop programs and policy frameworks to address homeless issues across the country (USA).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Homelessness as a Social and Capitalist Problem

Homelessness has increasingly become a problem in the United States over the past few decades as is evident in Pennsylvania's increasing homeless communities, and it is only continuing to get worse. Burt (2006) found that communities collect information on the extent of the problem of homelessness using electronic records from emergency housing shelters and a census conducted in abandoned properties, cars, on the streets, and other places. A point-in-time count of sheltered homeless populations presented by The State of Homelessness in America 2013 identified the following: (a) 633,782 people experiencing homelessness at least one night in January 2012; (b) This translates to a national homeless rate of 20 per 10,000 people; and (c) Veterans make up almost ten percent of the homeless population (The State of Homelessness in America, 2013). It is quite evident that homelessness in America, more specifically to the Louisiana State is a social fact with no singular clear explanation or even definition. It is also clear that homelessness is caused by many risk factors,

including individual risks, individual characteristics, low-income, and poverty, and structural risks (Anderson, 2003). Anderson (2003) further argued that the more a person is exposed to these risks, the greater their risk of becoming homeless. This also means that the chance for a person to remain homeless becomes greater as well.

It is an undeniable fact that an explanation of the epidemic of homelessness involves capitalism. Those who are homeless lack economic, social, and human capital. This is combined with the fact that many who are homeless had a low level of resources in the first place. According to McNaughton (2008), many people become homeless because they already had low levels of capital resources which were reduced even further by edgework, and “*anyone may become homeless, but they are more likely to when they have a low level of resources*” (McNaughton, 2008, p.108). McNaughton further argued that this economic situation also increases one’s risk of not only becoming homeless but remaining homeless. The main explanation for homelessness is that the United States is quickly becoming a capitalist country. Capitalism is the main cause of unemployment and homelessness in the last few decades. Above all, Karl Marx, said, in a capitalist society, there are those who have capital and those who do not (Anderson, 2003). Furthermore, this type of society identifies the ownership of capital as a deciding factor in a person’s worth both financially and personally.

Definitions and History of Homelessness in United State of America

The definition of homeless person, according to Public Law 111-22, the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, as amended by The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009 (Office of Policy Development and Research, 1995), takes into accounts the following: (a) Individuals and families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence and includes a subset for an individual who is exiting an institution where he or she resided for 90 days or less and who resided in an emergency shelter or a place not meant for human habitation immediately before entering that institution; (b) Individuals and families who will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence; (c) Unaccompanied youth and families with children and youth who are defined as homeless under other federal statutes who do not otherwise qualify as homeless under this definition; or (d) Individuals and families who are fleeing, or are attempting to flee, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence against the individual or a family member (Office of Policy Development and Research, 1995).

Meanwhile, the history of homelessness in United States of America has been traced as far back to the early days of the 17th century. The 1640s mark the earliest documented instances of unhoused people surviving in America. Colonists blamed the moral deficiencies of the unhoused as the cause of their homelessness, assuming that persons in God’s good graces would not be so unfortunate (Rufo, 2021). While Americans’ worldviews seem significantly changed since then, the tendency to fixate on individual traits to rationalize homelessness endures to this day. Hyperfocus on the individual generally drives municipalities to criminalize poverty and homelessness instead of investing in systems that end extreme poverty, such as increasing affordable housing stock. The end of slavery illustrates this point very well (Rufo, 2021). Freed slaves were not identified as refugees deserving reparations to end their economic plight, but criminalized as vagrants. Southern states enacted “Black Codes” intended to control public space and suppress Black people (Nittle, 2021). One vagrancy law out of Austin, explicitly criminalized all able-bodied Negroes who have abandoned the service of their employers, for the purpose of idleness, or who are found loitering or rambling about, or idly wandering about the streets or other public thoroughfares (Rufo, 2021).

An estimated one-fifth of the population experienced homelessness after the worst economic depression to ever hit the nation struck in the 1870s. Roughly one million of the 5.4 million living in the United States “tramped.” According to Robert Bruce’s *1877: Year of Violence*, evidence from the time revealed a close correlation between business slumps and the ‘tramp evil,’ (Rufo, 2021), but towns and cities still enacted harsher punishments for vagabondage in an effort to discourage vagrancy (Rufo, 2021; Beardsley, 2021). However, the term “homelessness” was first used in the United States in the 1870s, to describe itinerant “tramps” traversing the country in search of work. The primary emphasis at this time was on the loss of character and a perceived emerging moral crisis that threatened long-held ideas of home life, rather than on the lack of a permanent home. One religious group described the problem as “a crisis of men let loose from all the habits of domestic life, wandering without aim or home” (DePastino, 2003, p. 25). The solution to homelessness today is often perceived to be the creation or availability of affordable housing, but during the early 20th century, jobs (rather than housing) were viewed as the solution to the plight of transients wandering the country.

Kim & Margo (2003) also argued in the literature that fewer than 7 percent of Americans lived in cities prior to the 1820s. They further argued that the growing industrialization in the 19th century brought a steady migration to urban centers such as Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, and vagrancy records suggest a rise in the numbers of those in search of work in these cities. The Industrial Revolution ushered in a shift from the individual living and surviving on farms or working in skilled trades to the wage-earning worker dependent upon

wealthy employers. By the 1850s, lodging rooms for vagrants located in police stations served as the major shelter system, and most major cities reported increasing numbers of vagabonds (Kusmer, 2002).

After declining briefly after the Civil War, homelessness first became a national issue in the 1870s. Facilitated by the construction of the national railroad system, urbanization, industrialization, and mobility led to the emergence of tramps “riding the rails” in search of jobs. Jacob Riis, the Danish-born social reformer and muckraker whose later photojournalism depicted the deplorable lives of those in slums and tenements, arrived in America in 1870 at the age of 21 and described his subsequent 3 years as a member of “the great army of tramps” seeking work across the country. This “army” of overwhelmingly young, able-bodied, white men created a culture that blended the search for work with a love of the open road and a disdain for the constraints of workers in industrialized America (DePastino, 2003). Willing to embrace hard work, they constituted a counterculture with rules and habits that often engendered the wrath of mainstream society. Francis Wayland, the dean of Yale Law School, wrote in 1877, “As we utter the word tramp there arises straightway before us the spectacle of a lazy, shiftless, sauntering or swaggering, ill-conditioned, irreclaimable, incorrigible, cowardly, utterly depraved savage” (Wayland, 1877, p.10).

The word *hobo* first appeared in the 1880s in western America and softened the public's perceptions of tramps. This culture of migrant laborers was often romanticized in American literature, including by writers such as Walt Whitman, Bret Harte, and Sinclair Lewis. Jack London wrote vivid depictions of the *call of the road* as an escape from the oppression and monotony of factory work (Etulain, 1979). The storied hobo culture, popularized in the 1920s as “hobohemia” by Chicago sociologist and former tramp Nels Anderson (Anderson, 1923), faded as companies began to value loyalty and longevity and as seasonal jobs began to be taken by immigrant farm workers. World War II emerged as an economic engine that put the nation to work. Over the ensuing three decades, the typical individual experiencing homelessness continued to be disproportionately white and male but became increasingly older (usually over 50 years old), disabled, dependent on welfare or social security, and resided in cheap hotels, flophouses, and in single room occupancy hotels (SROs) located in the poorest neighborhoods and Skid Row areas of urban America (Rossi, 1989). Ironically, these people living in SROs and rooming houses during this period would be considered “housed” under HUD's current definition of homelessness. This observation underscores the difficulty in defining and studying homelessness throughout U.S. history.

Perceived Causes of Homelessness in United States of America

According to Invisible People (n.d.), there are many, complex causes of homelessness. At a basic level, people become homeless when their wages and income are not enough to cover rent or a mortgage and other necessities like food, medicine, health care, transportation, and child care. Meanwhile, some of the circumstances and life-altering events that cause a person to become homeless include: Low-paying jobs; Lay-offs; Serious illnesses or accident; Lack of income; Loss of a loved one or divorce; Lack of support networks; Evictions; Foreclosures; Poverty; Natural disasters (i.e. hurricanes, floods); Fires (Beardsley, 2021; Invisible People, n.d.) and mention a few. *Lack of Affordable Housing*: Research from the National Low-Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) finds a shortage of 7 million affordable and available rental homes for extremely low-income renters. *Lack of Trustworthy Relationships* – This is one of the most common causes of homelessness we see in the United States of America. We all want to be close to family, have someone to call a friend or a mentor, someone that we can go to when times get tough, or when we simply need a little guidance to put us back on the right path.

Illness and Disability – Illnesses and disabilities do not occur by choice, and the repercussions of enduring such traumatic circumstances too often cause homelessness. Chronic illness and disability prevent someone from holding a job, and without a job, you have no means of steady income (Invisible People, n.d.). Abuse is one of the causes of homelessness. It was observed from the literature that more than 90% of women experiencing homelessness attest to some form of physical or sexual abuse during their lifetime (Invisible People, n.d.; Grace Center, 2020). Again, *working, but in poverty* is also another cause of homelessness. Some people experiencing homelessness may have a job, but it might be low paying, leaving them unable to afford things they need like housing and food (Grace Center, 2020; Invisible People, n.d.). Invisible People (n.d.) further argued in the literature that *unemployment* is also another cause of homelessness in the United States of America. That is, with layoffs and workplace discrimination still actively existing in today's society, not everyone is lucky enough to find a secure place in the workforce. This sudden loss of income can force someone to stop paying their rent, which can then turn into eviction and homelessness (Invisible People, n.d.; Grace Center, 2020).

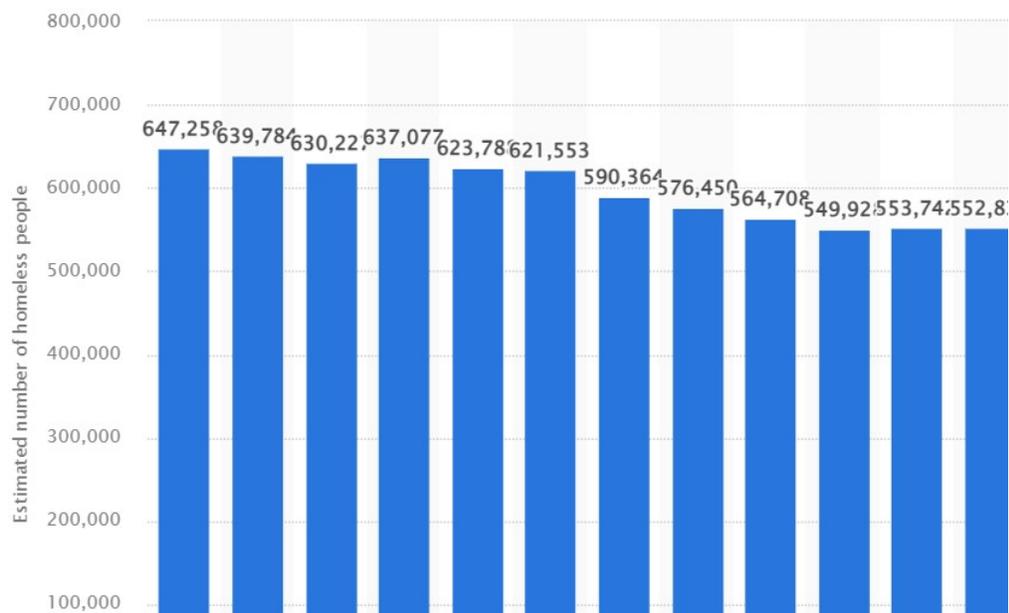
Also, *lack of Affordable Housing* is also seen in the literature as another cause of homelessness in the United States of America– in fact there is a clear connection between the lack of affordable places to live, and the number of people living on the streets (Grace Center, 2020; Beardsley, 2021; Invisible People, n.d.). *Personal Hardship* – here homelessness is the result of tragedy or personal hardship – again, circumstances that are out of your control. That is, living through a big life-changing event, whether it be natural disaster, toxic

relationship, or divorce, requires additional support and guidance (Grace Center, 2020; Invisible People, n.d.). All these factors are anticipated factors that are more likely to contribute the number of homelessness across the country.

METHOD AND MATERIALS

This current study is modeled around the works of McCombes (2019) descriptive research design. McCombes defined descriptive research as a type of research design that aims to obtain information to systematically describe a phenomenon, situation, or population. More specifically, he explained in the literature that the design enables the researcher to answer the what, when, where, and how questions regarding the research problem, rather than the why (McCombes, 2019). The data source for the study analysis came from the 2021 Census data, the 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS. The study population considers families and individual homeless population in the United States of America. The total number of individuals and families who are homeless in the United States of America has been reduced from 647,258 (in 2007) to 326,126 (in 2021) but rose slightly to 582,462 in 2022 (see Figure A and Figure 1 for more details). According to U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (2023), as of December 2022, the total number of individuals and families who are homeless in the United States of America was estimated around 582,462. Therefore, the study's population considers 582,462 peoples, who are experiencing homelessness in the United States and its territories.

Figure A: Estimated Number of Homeless People in the United States from 2007 to 2021



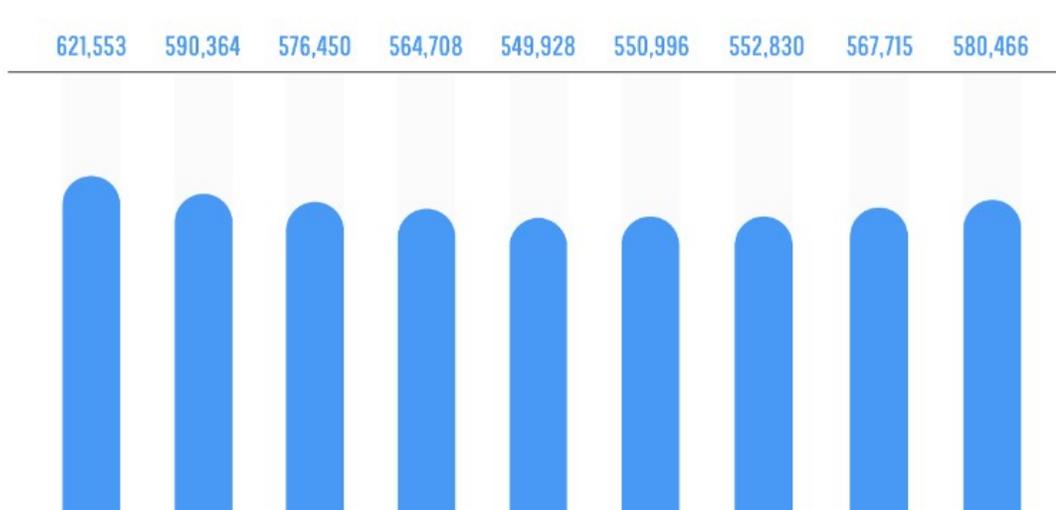
Source: Erin Duffin, 2022.

DATA PRESENTATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

Figure 1 presents the discussion for Americans experiencing homelessness. This information was captured from the 2021 Census which only included individuals living in sheltered situations. In December of 2022, HUD calculated that 582,462 people were experiencing homelessness in the United States and its territories (see Figure 1 for more details). That number represented an increase of nearly 2,000 individuals over

the last complete accounting of 2020, yet remained steady at 0.18 percent of the nation’s population. Despite this slight increase in those without homes since the pandemic’s start and gradual increases since 2016, the number of people experiencing homelessness is lower today than a decade ago due to several short-term interventions designed at the federal, states, and local levels.

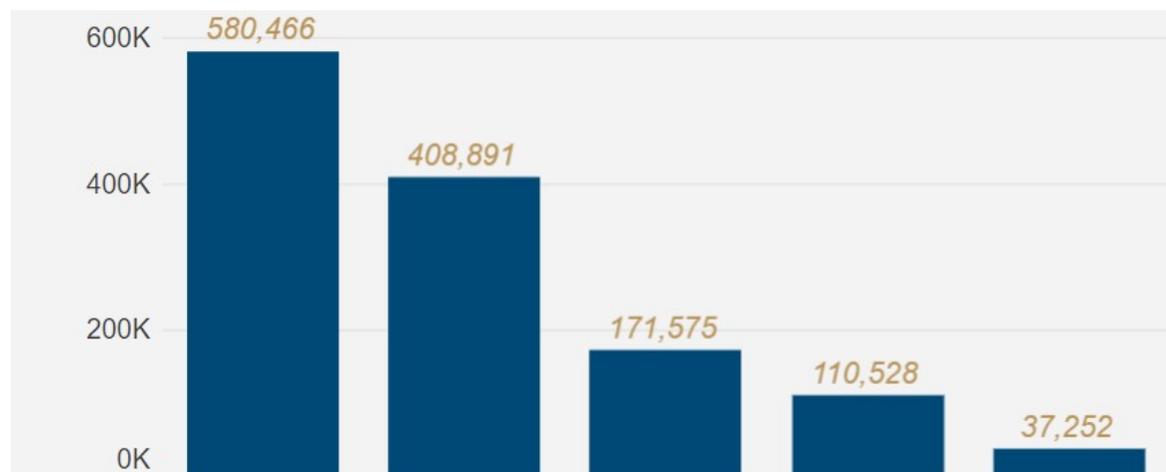
Figure 1: Americas Experiencing Homelessness (2012-2022)



Source: 2021 Census

Figure 2 reveals the characteristics of homelessness in the United States of America by family type. Based on the available dataset from the National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS, it was observed that most of the homeless peoples were individuals without families and children (i.e. 70 percent), and the rest were people living in families with children (see Figure 2 for more details). They lived in every state and territory, and they reflected the diversity of the Americans population. Historically, policymakers and practitioners at every level of government have focused special attention on specific subpopulations. Decision-makers are often concerned about children and young people due to their vulnerability. People in families with children make up 30 percent of the homeless population. Unaccompanied youth (under age 25) account for six percent of the larger group (see Figure 2 for more details).

Figure 2: Characteristics of Homelessness in United States of America by Family Types



(Source: National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS, 2022)

By inspection, people experiencing “chronic homelessness” belong to another group that often singled out for attention. According to National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS (2022), these individuals have disabilities and have also: 1) been continuously homeless for at least a year; or 2) experienced homelessness at least four times in the last three years for a combined length of time of at least a year (see Figure 2 for more details). Chronically homeless individuals are currently 19 percent of the homeless population. Finally, due to their service to our country, veterans are often analyzed separately from the larger group. They represent only six percent of people experiencing homelessness. Although the homeless population is diverse, some subgroups are more likely to find themselves without a place to call home. Hypothetically, it is theorized in the literature that homeless risk is significantly tied to gender, race, and ethnicity (National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS, 2022).

Figure 3 presents the discussion for the gender distribution of homelessness in United States of America. Figure 3 reveals that males are far more likely to experience homelessness than their female counterparts. That is, out of every 10,000 males, 22 are homeless (representing a total male homeless population of 352,211). For women and girls, that number is 13 homeless (representing a total female homeless population of 223,578). By inspection, gender disparities are even more evident when the focus is solely on individual adults (the most significant subgroup within homelessness). The overwhelming majority of homelessness in the United States of America, representing about 70 percent of the entire population are men (see Figure 3 for more details).

Figure 3: Gender Distribution of Homelessness in United States of America

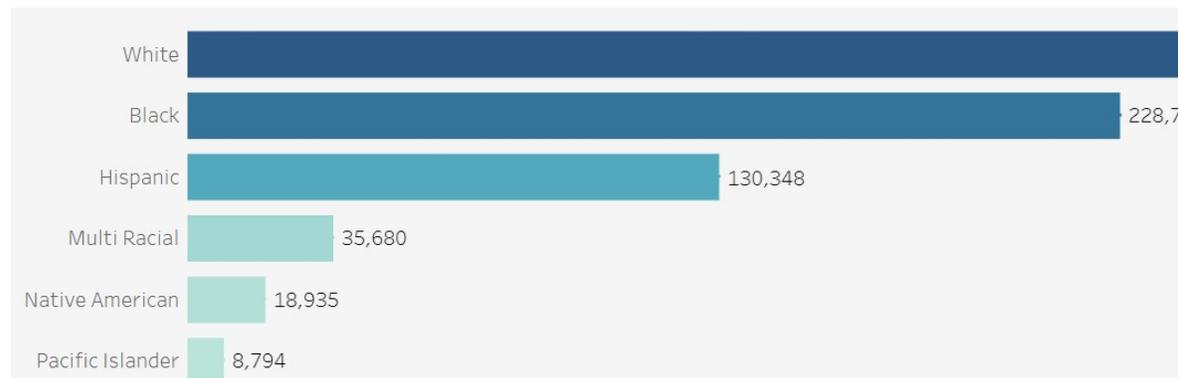


(Source: National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS, 2022)

Figure 4 analyzes race as another significant predictor of homelessness in United States of America. As with so many other areas of American life, historically marginalized groups are more likely to be disadvantaged within housing and homelessness spheres. Higher unemployment rates, lower incomes, less access to healthcare, and higher incarceration rates are some of the factors that are likely to contributing to higher rates of homelessness among people of color. Numerically, white people are the largest racial group within homelessness, accounting for more than a quarter-million people. However, historically marginalized racial groups are far more likely to experience homelessness as a result of segregation and discrimination in employment and housing, among other things.

Figure 4 further reveals that Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders have the highest rate of homelessness (109 out of every 10,000 people). Groups such as Native Americans (45 out of every 10,000) and Black or African Americans (52 out of every 10,000) also experience elevated rates. Importantly, these rates are much higher than the nation’s overall rate of homelessness (18 out of every 10,000).

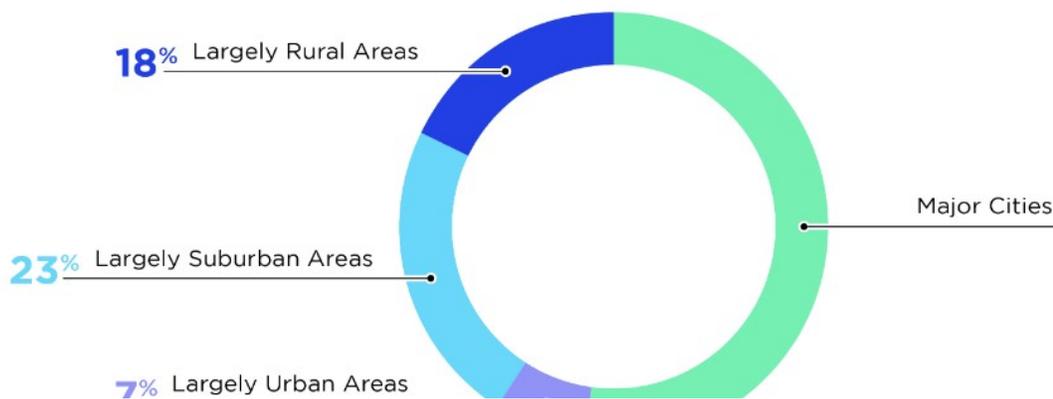
Figure 4: Race as Predictor of Homelessness in United States of America



(Source: National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS, 2022)

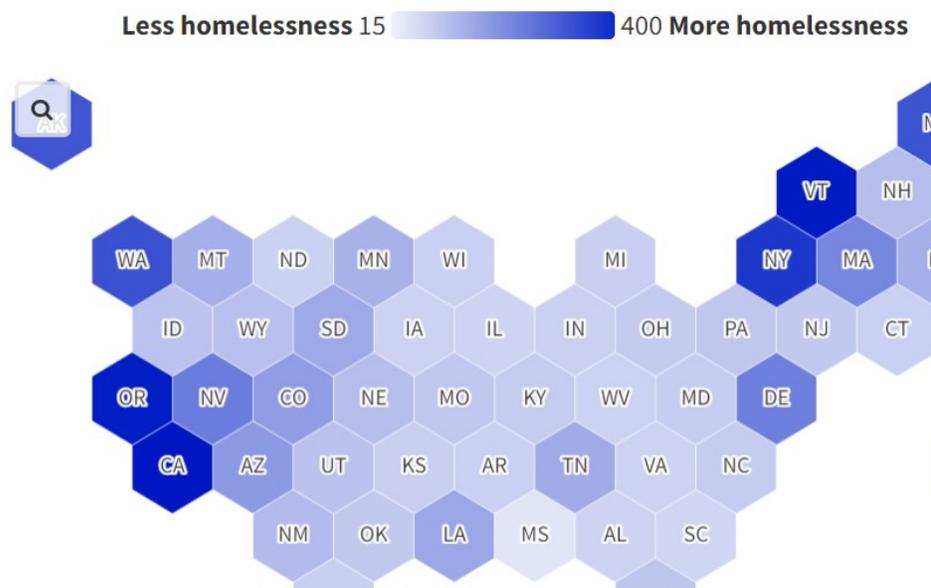
Figure 5 presents discussion for regional trends in homelessness. By inspection, Figure 5 reveals that homelessness touches communities of all sizes across every region, though some bear its brunt more than others. According to the 2021 Census, some of the contributing factors to the concentration of the unhoused include local financial hardship, housing markets, climate conditions, and available social resources. Though the common conception of those experiencing homelessness might be unsheltered individuals on the streets of a city (52%), and largely urban areas (7%), the issue reaches communities of all types (see Figure 5). While most unhoused Americans occupy urban areas, many live in suburban (23%) and rural settings (18%).

Figure 5: Percentage of People Experiencing Homelessness by Community Setting



Source: 2021 Census

Figure 6: People Experiencing Homeless per 100,000 Residents in 2022 By States or Regional Distribution of Homelessness



Source: 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development

Figure 6 presents the discussion for the regional distribution of homelessness by states. Figure 6 further presents the discussion for the people experiencing homeless per 100,000 residents by states. Among major cities, both Los Angeles (recorded 54,469 homeless individuals) and New York City (also recorded 32,308 homeless individuals) have the largest unhoused populations, collectively accounting for nearly one-fifth of the country's total afflicted. No other city contains more than 10,000 persons experiencing homelessness, with Seattle, San Jose, and Oakland/San Francisco rounding out the top five afflicted metroplexes (see Figure 6). Meanwhile, Figure 6 revealed that the major cities saw an increase in unhoused individuals over the past two years (5,694 additional persons) and featured the highest percentage of unsheltered homeless (55 percent). However, the most notable expansion in unhoused populations occurred in rural areas, where homeless numbers have jumped six percent since 2020 (see Figure 6). Toward this end, regionally, the western United States exhibited the highest per capita rates of homelessness, though numbers varied significantly by state (see Figure 6 for more details).

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion of the 2021 Census data, the 2022 Annual Homelessness Assessment Report by U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, and the National Alliance to END HOMELESSNESS dataset, the study recommends the following:

- The study strongly recommends that the federal government should create more programs and employment opportunities that will give equal opportunities to all. This particular policy recommendation if properly implemented will go a long way to minimize or help eradicate homelessness in the country. This is because such as a program if adopted for implementation will give equal opportunities to all citizens irrespective of family type, marital status, racial types, and gender type.
- The study strongly recommends that all the 50 states across the United States of America needs more affordable housing for both renters and homeowners in order to recover fully and fairly from any type of shocks being it a devastation and displacement due to natural disasters, fire outbreak, hurricanes,

unemployment shocks, and domestic abuses to help such individuals to affordable home. It was observed from the literature that several factors including lack of affordable housing, abuses, unemployment, etc. are the key causes of homelessness in the United States of America. Therefore, taking into consideration programs that will create more affordable houses, and to also take care of both natural, and human shocks will go a long way to help the country minimize the homelessness rate.

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