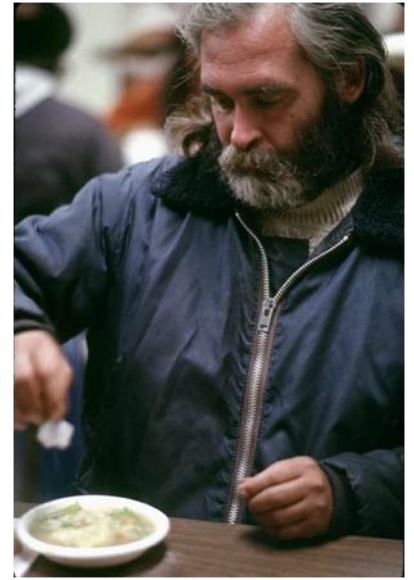


Who are the Homeless?

The homeless are our neighbors. They are people who can't find affordable housing, whose fears about foreclosure, eviction, or paying off crushing debt finally came true. Some were unable to find or keep a job because of disability or mental illness. Mental illness and the corresponding inability to access services are one of the most prevalent causes of homelessness in North America.



Substance abuse is also one of the most common causes of homelessness. Some abuse alcohol and drugs because they are trying to ease fear and pain. Others squander resources on these things and end up on the street. Domestic violence puts families on the street, and emancipation (release) from foster care systems places many already troubled teens into this condition. These represent the edge where many neighbors live and the situations they try to avoid but sometimes cannot.

HOMELESS FACTOIDS

- One out of every 200 North Americans are homeless.
- Of the homeless population, 20% are considered chronically homeless, while 80% averages just three weeks of homelessness.
- Seven out of every 10 homeless people live in cities.
- On Guam, 37% of the unsheltered homeless are less than 18-years-old.
- In the U.S., 25% were physically or sexually abused as children, 27% were in foster care, and 21% were homeless at some point during their childhood.
- Of the 500,000 foster care youth, 50% become homeless within 18 months of emancipation.
- Of the 23 million veterans living in the U.S. and Puerto Rico, 131,000 are homeless on any given night.

What is their heritage?

Homelessness is contemporary and ancient, local and universal. Jesus said, “The poor will be with you always” (Matthew 26:11). The Bible is packed with stories about nomads: the world’s first couple was evicted; the tabernacle was designed to be carried; the nativity occurred in a borrowed barn; Jesus traveled with a band of homeless men, picked grain he did not grow, and prayed under someone else’s olive tree; the early church met in catacombs, scattered and oppressed; and Saint John, Saint Patrick, and Francis of Assisi were all wanderers. The Church would not be complete without them. In the modern era, homelessness has proliferated all across North America, especially since the 1960s. The reasons are complex: de-institutionalization of long-term psychiatric patients, burgeoning home costs, growing divorce rates, larger state prison populations and lack of transitional opportunities for newly released inmates, more common use of debilitating drugs, and the deterioration of families. While homelessness has always existed, it has become pandemic in North America, indicating more systemic societal problems.

“Many homeless people are fanatical in their allegiance to some ideal, whether it is religious, political, philosophical, or even dietary.”

What are their beliefs?

Many homeless people are fanatical in their allegiance to some ideal, whether it is religious, political, philosophical, or even dietary. They carry the values and beliefs of the culture in which they were raised. Their ideas may be exaggerated and saturate their whole lives, yet with little practical positive effect. Some come from Christian backgrounds, use religious language, and understand themselves as prodigal, sinners, or lost. They may even carry Bibles in their backpacks. Countless panhandlers write the phrase, “God bless you,” on signs, but the language of the Church is foreign to many. Drugs, especially amphetamines, heighten both religious feelings and paranoia, and may not be an expression of a person’s real belief system. Regardless of religious beliefs, most are glad for prayer.

How can we pray?

- Pray with your heart. Humbly speak to God recognizing your own dependence and powerlessness. You are made of the same stuff. D.T. Miles said, “Evangelism is just one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread.”
- Pray with your hands. Find meaningful, redemptive work and make it an act of prayer. Fix something. Rescue something. Take the mundane and make it beautiful. A life steeped in good work is more responsive to the broken and disenfranchised.
- Pray with the homeless. Look them in the eye and ask how you can pray for them. They rarely refuse. Tell them about the power of agreeing in Jesus’ name. Claim for them and with them a present and a future that make sense, relationships that endure, and a heart that is made ready and open for every good gift God wants to give them.

What can my church do?

Endvisioning — beginning with the end in mind

- Research what is already happening for the homeless in your community. Join the work already being done. Co-labor with your neighbors who don't yet know Christ. Practical work with your neighbors increases your credibility as witnesses for Christ.
- Include the homeless in the planning and daily work at your church or community center. Find ways to work with them for the benefit of those who are less fortunate.
- As a small group or Sunday School class, experiment with powerlessness. Take turns panhandling for someone on the street, and give the homeless what you earn. Talk about your experiences as a group.
- Conduct a Vision Tour of your city, taking church leaders along to let them see the homeless, where they live, and where points of connection might be possible.
- Sleep in the park or on the sidewalk yourself for one night.
- Investigate existing programs to help the homeless. As a part of this, it is helpful to know laws regarding the homeless, mentally ill, fugitives, and ongoing welfare.

Prayer — focusing on the people as well as calling out workers to the harvest

- Ask God to lead you to the needs around you. For instance, a student in your school or co-worker may be homeless and you don't know it.
- Adopt the homeless as a long-term prayer emphasis. Assign certain segments of the homeless in your community to specific Sunday School classes or small groups.
- Conduct a special day of prayer and fasting for the homeless of your community. Provide a prayer guide, create interest with handouts, and pray for a "season" during worship services.

Networking for Evangelism — identifying relationships

- Provide a shower and place to shave, storage, mail delivery, and a place for phone calls from family or for job search. Provide seasonal shelter during extreme heat, cold, rain, or snow. Provide 25 cent laundry or tokens for a local Laundromat.
- People are vulnerable when they are in transition and more open to the gospel. Learn who is getting out of prison, being released from other institutions, or who the returning vets are. Frequent the bus stations and day labor pools. Foster children before they age out, becoming too old for certain services. Ensure that these in vulnerable situations make a successful transition to independent living.
- In groups of two or three, visit the homeless at their squats or camps. Bring food and, if they will let you, eat it with them. Better still, bring a Coleman stove or small cooking grill and cook with them, or let them do the cooking. Bring dog food and socks.
- If you want to build relationships, you may bring a guitar or a Frisbee on return visits.
- Identify some venues for gatherings that are folksy and not slick. Involve ordinary people, take risks, and let people sing and dance. Become their advocate, asking questions that benefit them. Is there a place for a luxury car to park, but not the bicycle or shopping cart? Could you take care of people's backpacks and sleeping bags for them when they come to worship? What would it take for your church to accommodate their dogs and companion pets?
- When your portion at a restaurant is too large, cut it in half before you start eating. Ask for a box, napkins, and plastic fork to take with you. Find someone on the street who is hungry to give it to.

Starting Small Groups — that can become churches

- As you work with the homeless, invite small groups to form where they live and where travel is not a problem.
- Disciple, train, and release people who come to Christ as evangelists, teachers, pastors, and church starters. Encourage them to tell their stories. They are often the best witnesses to other homeless and can easily get small groups going among them.
- Start a church indoors or outside with the homeless in mind. Provide food. Keep in mind that the literacy rate is lower than it is for the general public. Teach about spiritual gifts, and help every individual find a job.

(continued page 4)

What can my church do? (cont'd)

Starting Small Groups (continued)

- Identify leaders who could become church leaders and a pastor from the group who would help it become a church. The homeless may desire to become a part of an existing church and should be welcomed.

Mobilization

- Connect with believers in other churches, including those in your Baptist association, to establish a coordinated ministry among the homeless.
-



www.peoplegroups.info

If you cannot locate this people group in your community, find them online at

www.peoplegroups.info, a site sponsored by the North American Mission Board, SBC.

What are their needs?

Many homeless people have burned their relational bridges. They believe that nobody wants them, their stories, their skills, or their dreams. Like everyone else, homeless people care about being acknowledged, valued, and needed. They need people to look in their eyes instead of treating them as if they were invisible. Their basic human requirements include safety, food, water, and shelter. Eighty percent of homeless people are not chronically homeless. At some point in their lives, this 80% will hold jobs, be rehabilitated, and live in a more permanent place. Some only need a small break—appropriate clothing to find work, a phone card to call home, recovery of a Social Security card, a mailbox where they can receive mail, or a few meals until they receive a paycheck. Others need greater opportunities like a job, a place of safety while recovering from abuse, or a few months of rent or shelter. Value their stories, listen to their dreams, employ their skills, and listen carefully to how they express their needs. Jesus often asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” An honest, “How’s it going today?” can open doors for ministry and evangelism.

What is keeping the gospel from them?

Most Sunday morning worship services do not seem accessible to homeless people. They know that they look and smell different than the rest of the congregation, and most of the time they do not feel welcome. The experience of many is that they sit by themselves, eat fellowship meals by themselves, and few want to shake their hands. One of the easiest places for Christian groups and mission teams to practice sharing their faith is on the streets where homeless live. They sometimes feel like a person who is sitting alone will be receptive to the gospel. However, sharing Christ relationally, rather than merely confrontationally, is generally more effective with almost anyone. People in crisis are more responsive to the gospel, while the chronically homeless are naturally more set in their ways. Care should be focused on the young traveler or the recently homeless because they are more likely to hope and believe that change is possible. On the other hand, creating comfortable dependency is sometimes counterproductive; it may serve to create contexts where people manipulate situations that make them appear responsive to the gospel, only because they think it is what is expected of them. Discipleship happens best where names and faces are known.

Information may be updated by writing peoplegroups@namb.net.

© 2010, North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, Alpharetta, Georgia. All rights reserved. The North American Mission Board grants permission for reproduction of this publication for educational purposes. Alteration of this publication is strictly prohibited. This publication may not be sold for profit. All other inquiries should be addressed to: Permissions, North American Mission Board, 4200 North Point Pkwy., Alpharetta, Ga. 30022-4176; or e-mail permissions@namb.net.

