

# Factsheet: The Causes of Homelessness

Homelessness results from a complex set of circumstances that require people to choose between food, shelter, and other basic needs. As a society, we need to ensure jobs that pay a living wage, to adequately support those who cannot work, to maintain affordable housing, and to provide access to health care. Some systemic issues to consider:

**Eroding Work Opportunities**  
 There are fewer jobs and they don't pay as well. Causes of wage declines include a drop in the number and bargaining power of unions; erosion in the value of the minimum wage a decline in manufacturing jobs and the corresponding expansion of lower-paying service-sector employment (baristas unite!); globalization; and increased nonstandard work (temp and part-time employment).

**Affordable housing**  
 There are fewer housing and apartment units available for people making middle or low incomes. Banks are bailed out while homes are foreclosed on.

**Racism in the U.S.**  
 After over 200 years of legal slavery, and 40 years since they received rights of full citizenship, African-Americans today face more subtle forms of racism, manifested in a variety of ways. White privilege continues to benefit whites over all people of color in pay scales, career opportunities, and education.

**Education**  
 Public schools are often the only option for non-privileged children. They are commonly overcrowded, under-funded, and sometimes even unsafe. Public education is not the ticket out of poverty many claim it to be, especially when contrasted to private and/or suburban schools.

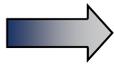
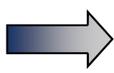
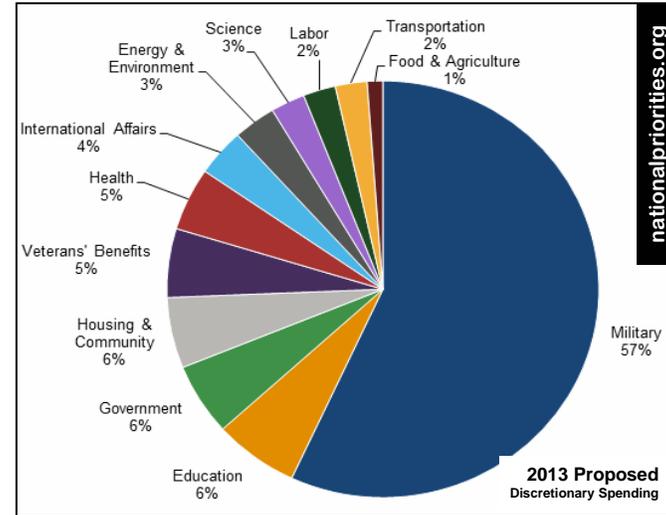
**U.S. Spending**  
 A budget is a quantitative representation of priorities and values.  
  
 The U.S. Treasury divides all spending into three groups: mandatory spending, discretionary spending and interest on debt. Discretionary spending, about one third of the total budget, is the portion which Congress has the power to decide how much to spend (the others are set levels). Spending increases in education, health, housing, transportation, etc. would help alleviate many of the causes of homelessness.

The current federal minimum wage is \$7.25/hour. A living wage (no health benefits) for a single adult with one child is \$17 in St. Louis.  
  
 About half of those people earning minimum wage are their household's chief breadwinner.

In the past 10 years, 470,000 public and private units have been lost due to deterioration, and annual funding for public housing has declined by 25%.  
  
 In 2009, a worker needed to earn an average of \$15 to afford a one-bedroom apartment in the U.S. Between 2008-2009, there was a 32% jump in the number of foreclosures.

In 2005, a college educated man earned \$66,000 if he was white and \$45,000 if he was African American.  
  
 Caucasian and African Americans speed, steal, deal and use drugs in proportionally equal numbers. African American men are **five times** as likely to be arrested for a drug offense.

In 1998, inner-city schools spent about \$8,000 per student, suburban schools about \$12,000, and wealthier suburban schools about \$18,000 in New York City. This is a typical trend in the U.S.  
  
 Suburban public school teachers typically receive 20% higher salary than urban teachers.



endhomelessness.org, Living Wage Calculator, Center on Budget & Policy Priorities

childrensdefense.org, census.gov

Savage Inequalities by Jonathan Kozol

nationalpriorities.org

## Homelessness and Stereotypes

The relationship between these factors and homelessness is complex. Contrary to popular stereotype, none of these factors alone has been proven to directly cause homelessness. Rather, when a person is low-income and has one of these circumstances, the likelihood of homelessness increases.

### Drug Addiction

Low income people are often criminalized for addiction while wealthier people are offered treatment. Addiction does increase the risk of displacement for the precariously housed; in the absence of appropriate treatment, it may doom one's chances of getting housing once on the streets. Homeless people often face insurmountable barriers to obtaining health care, especially including treatment, counseling, and recovery support for addiction.

### Domestic Violence

Approximately 63% of homeless women have experienced domestic violence; women experiencing abuse who live in poverty are often forced to choose between abusive relationships and homelessness.

### Prison

Generally speaking, it is more likely that the kids you meet at Karen House will go to jail than go to college. 1 in 100 American adults are in prison (imagine the combined populations of St. Louis, Atlanta, Pittsburgh, Des Moines, and Miami behind bars). Crimes that in other countries would usually lead to community service, fines, or drug treatment lead to significant prison time here due to punitive mandatory minimum sentencing, "three strikes" laws, and reductions in parole or early release programs.

### Mental Illness

The mass release of patients from institutionalized mental hospitals in the 1950s and 1960s did not directly lead to a mass increase of homeless people with mental illness; this happened during the Reagan years in the 1980s, when incomes and housing options for those living on the margins were cut drastically. There are very few options (psychiatrists, help with prescription costs, etc.) for people with a debilitating mental illness in St. Louis who don't have medical insurance.

### Lack of Affordable Health Care

For families and individuals struggling to pay the rent, a serious illness or disability can start a downward spiral into homelessness, beginning with a lost job, depletion of savings to pay for care, and eventual eviction. One in three Americans, or 86.7 million people, is uninsured.

#### **Further Reading and Sources:**

<http://nationalhomeless.org/factsheets/why.html>

Karen House RoundTable issues: "A Discussion on Mental Illness," "The Poor are Still with Us," "Hospitality in the Age of Crack," "Crossing the Divide from Privilege to Community," and "The 'Criminal' Justice System"