

on the Record

Experts Respond to Questions about the Biggest Misperceptions among the General Public about Homelessness

What if there were a U.S. city where no families had homes? In a way, that city exists. There are 238,110 people in families who are homeless on any given night in the U.S., according to data collected by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. To give an idea of what that means: a city made up of just those people would be larger than Baton Rouge, the capital of Louisiana, and have twice the population of Springfield, Illinois. Furthermore, the figure 238,110 does not take into account those who might be called the “hidden homeless,” people who are living doubled-up with friends or family or excluded for other reasons from estimates of people without homes.

Myths and misperceptions persist about the people in this phantom city. *UNCENSORED* asked four professionals who work with homeless individuals in various capacities to identify some of those myths and misperceptions, reveal where they come from, and discuss ways to fight them.

It's Not Always Drugs

One false idea mentioned by most of those we interviewed is that “the families got themselves in this position because of drug and alcohol issues,” as Christina Perdomo, a pupil personnel worker in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, put it. “In the families I work with, [that] would involve about 5 percent of the families. Mental-health issues may exist among a few, but basically the majority are in this situation due to economic conditions. Many have lost jobs, or their hours have reduced so far that they were then unable to pay their rent or mortgage and therefore were evicted or foreclosed upon.”

“I think the biggest misperception is that people choose to be homeless and that it is usually people who are alcoholics, drug addicts, or the mentally ill who end up homeless, which some

of us know isn't true,” says Amy Grassette. She *ought* to know: a wife, mother, and grandmother, Grassette got firsthand knowledge of homelessness when her family's airport-shuttle business failed as a result of the 9/11 attacks. After living doubled-up and then in a hotel, Grassette's family entered a shelter in Worcester, Massachusetts. There, they received services from the Family Health Center's Homeless Families Program, for which Grassette volunteered after getting back on her feet. Today she is employed by the Family Health Center and serves on the boards of several homeless-services organizations, currently chairing the National Consumer Advisory Board for the Health Care for the Homeless Council. As Grassette knows better than most, homelessness is usually not a lifestyle choice. “I certainly didn't wake up one day and decide to be homeless,” she says.

It's Families With Children

Christine Achre, CEO of Chicago's Primo Center for Women and Children, says an important fact many don't know is that “homelessness is a family and child issue. I think in most cities throughout the country, the general public sees homelessness as a ‘single male sleeping on a park bench.’ This is because most cities ensure shelter services are provided to women and children. I don't think the general public is fully aware that one in 45 children is homeless throughout America.”

Grassette agrees: “I think for some who see panhandlers out on the streets, they think all homeless people look like vagrants begging, when we know that the fastest-growing population of homeless people in our country is families and children, as was our case.”

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on the Homefront

The Hidden Homeless

Asked about the sources of misperceptions of homelessness, Achre blamed “the experiences the general public has in their own community on a day-to-day basis. If someone does not see a child who is actually homeless, it is perhaps easier to pretend that child homelessness does not exist.”

“As an educator, I feel that the biggest misperception amongst other educators is that individuals that are homeless always live in cars, shelters, or motels,” says Ryan Voegtlin, who like Perdomo is an Anne Arundel County pupil personnel worker. “In reality, a majority of the students that are homeless within our school system are actually doubling up with family members and friends due to eviction, foreclosure, or financial hardship.”

As Perdomo notes, those hidden homeless include “students who are homeless and do not live with a parent. The misconception with these students is that they are really bad kids so the parents kicked them out. This is rarely the case. They may be a typical teen, and if the parents have various stressors in their lives they are quick to lash out, and it is sometimes due to this continual conflict that the 18-year-old student then moves in with friends. Lack of affordable or free counseling and/or parenting classes sometimes contributes to this.” Also, Perdomo adds, sometimes youth are homeless because their families are evicted from their homes and are “unable to find temporary shelter to accommodate everyone. The children of various ages are then split up among families and friends until the parents are able to find a place to accommodate everyone.”

The Media Hurts, But It Can Help

Perdomo tells *UNCENSORED* that many myths result from “stereotypes of homeless seen in the media. The homeless alcoholic or schizophrenic that [people] may see on the street, so they believe ALL homelessness is due to drinking, drugs, and mental-health [issues].”

Voegtlin expressed a similar opinion, saying, “On shows such as *60 Minutes* or *Dateline*, it makes for a more interesting story to see a family living in a car and eventually making their way out of it, rather than a person that got evicted and has to move in with a family member until they get back on their feet. The reality of homelessness is not always the interesting story, but the story that needs to be told to bring more awareness to the issue.”

But just as television and other sources of public information can spread inaccurate views, they also have the potential to educate. What are needed, Grassette says, are “more media stories. The media is quick to get things out there, but we need more

stories in the media, such as the *60 Minutes* piece that was done on homeless children in Florida.” Perdomo recommends that other avenues of public information—such as commercials, billboards, flyers, inserts in newspapers, and the Internet—be used to tell the real stories of homeless people in America.

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Changing Attitudes

While our interviewees felt unanimously that the media needs to spread the right messages about homelessness, they also pointed to efforts that are already underway to combat myths. Voegtlin reports, “In our county, we provide training and professional development to many staff members on the issues of homelessness and what homelessness may look like in our school system. This is an effort to dispel any myths and to create more sensitivity to the impact of homelessness on education.”

“I think many organizations are trying on a regular basis to change [misperceptions],” Grassette says, “and I also believe that in light of our economy and the mortgage crisis over the last few years, many people are starting to see homelessness in a different way because if they have never been touched by it in the past, they may now know someone who has lost a home or who is having a difficult time making ends meet, so they are in jeopardy of becoming homeless.”

Achre says, “I think the ... National Center on Family Homelessness’ recent publications on child homelessness as well as the work of the Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness have done an effective job at advocacy on a federal/national level. I think providers, like ours, support the work on a national level and communicate that work on a local level. This allows the opportunity for policy to drive best practices.”

Still, Achre concluded, “Until all communities throughout the country develop a plan to best address the needs of family homelessness, we still have work to do in ensuring the false ideas are not perpetuated.” ■

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