

JPIC Corner

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Coordinator's Note

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Homelessness in the United States

It is sometimes hard to fathom that in one of the richest countries in the world, such as the United States, that we have between 600,000 to 2.5 million homeless persons.¹ This will be the focus of our attention for our February JPIC Corner. We will show some startling information about homelessness in the United States as well as offer solutions to this crisis. First we will examine our Christian responsibility towards the homeless.

On February 14, 2010 our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI visited the homeless shelter at Termini Station in Rome. He addressed the homeless, "Know that the Church loves you profoundly and won't abandon you, because it recognizes in every one of your faces, the face of Christ."² When we respond to our neighbors in need, we are feeding, clothing, and sheltering Jesus, "Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me."³ Acts of charity properly belong to the mission of the Church. As disciples of Jesus, we cannot ignore our social responsibilities towards our neighbors in need. It is the spirit of the 7th commandment that we are summoned to offer shelter to our brothers and sisters who have no place to rest in the evening.⁴ Those who shelter the homeless witness to the love of Christ for his abandoned. They assist them to rediscover their dignity and worth as human beings. Christian homeless shelters offer "a concrete manifestation of the collaboration of the Christian community with civil institutions to promote the 'common good' and thereby offer a 'true school' in which youth and other volunteers can learn to



Photo for illustration

In the US alone, between 600,000 and 2.5 million people are homeless. Worldwide, 100 million people are homeless.

be 'builders of a civilization of love, capable of taking in others in their uniqueness and differences.'⁵

This article is also available online.

Did You Know?

- **About 12% of homeless people in shelters are recent victims of domestic violence.**
- **Family homelessness is increasing, rising 13% between 2007 and 2009. Homelessness among individuals not in families decreased by 7.2% over the same period.**
- **Over 1.5 million people used emergency shelters or transitional housing in 2009.**
- **Most people who use emergency shelters stay for a short period of time. In 2009, 60% of people using emergency shelters stayed a week or less.**
- **An emergency shelter bed costs around \$8,067 annually, more than the average annual cost of a Section 8 housing voucher.**

1. <http://www.fas.org>, 2009

2. *Pope Benedict tells Rome's homeless that the Church 'will not abandon you'* www.catholicnewsagency.com

3. Cf. 25:34-40; 25:40.

4. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2447

5. www.catholicnewsagency.com

Who is Homeless in the United States?



In truth, homelessness can happen to anyone, a point driven home by this [news story about Miss Colorado USA 2011](#) (who graduated magna cum laude) but here is a glimpse at some of the groups who experience homelessness in the United States.

Our Children

In 2009, over one-fifth (22%) of people in shelters and transitional housing were under the age of 18. 172,000 sheltered homeless children (50%) are younger than six years old.

Our Teenagers and Young Adults

2.3% of all homeless people are unaccompanied youth. Each year, between 1 million and 1.6 million youth experience homelessness and one in four former foster youth experience homelessness

within 2.5 to 4 years after exiting foster care.

Our Veterans

Veterans represent around 17% of the adult, sheltered, homeless population in the US. Close to 500,000 Veterans pay more than 50% of their income for rent. Past studies show that up to 25% of all homeless people at a point in time are Veterans.

Our Families

Of the 643,067 people who were homeless on a single night in January 2009, 37% were persons in families. The number of households with children with 'severe' housing problems has increased over time, from 8% in 1978 to 13.8% in 2005.

Those Who Are Ill

Around 25% of all homeless adults struggle with severe mental illness and over one third (36%) have issues with chronic substance abuse. 38% of homeless individuals have a disability, compared to 18% of the US population.

Victims of Domestic Violence

12% of sheltered homeless persons are recent victims of domestic violence. Violence against women is a leading cause of homelessness among women.

Going Home...to Homelessness?

Over 650,000 people are released from prisons each year. Some literally have no place to go, as one of our members with over 20 years of experience in prison ministry, Fr. Dave Foxen, shared with us:

I remember one man who was on the mental health case load. He had done well and was eventually able to live in the general population in the prison. One day he told me that he would be going home the following week. "Going home" is an expression used by everyone, no matter where their destination may be. When I asked where he was going, he told me quite simply that he would be homeless the moment he walked out the gate. He would not be on parole and had no where to go. He would leave with the address of the local mental health services and with the advice that he try to contact them.

The prevalence of histories of incarceration among people who are homeless (nearly 20% of homeless persons in shelters have spent time in prison) challenges us to think carefully about how we reintegrate people who have been incarcerated back into mainstream society.

Parole vs. "Maxing out"

If a man or woman is leaving prison on parole, they may have some advantages, despite the fact that many parole officers have very large case loads. Depending on the conditions of the parole, they may be sent to a half-way house, but even if they are living at home, they have some supervision and can receive some assistance in finding needed services and a job. In contrast, people who have completed their sentence (those who have "maxed out") do not fall under the parole provisions, and are not eligible for the kind of assistance which is provided for people on parole.

What Causes Homelessness?

The reasons a person or a family becomes homeless are often complex. Homelessness is related to several other issues of social justice, including poverty, lack of affordable housing, unemployment, domestic violence, child abuse, disparities in access to education, and lack of access to mental health care, just to name a few. For instance, consider the fact that in the United States, there are close to 6 million households without housing assistance and with incomes below 50% of the area median income. These households spend over half of their income on rent (or less often, live in substandard housing). Individuals and families who can afford to pay for housing today may lose that ability if they lose their job or if their hours are cut.

If we dig deeper, we might ask what could cause a person to lose his or her job or not be able to find a job. Current economic conditions are certainly one factor, as rates of unemployment are relatively high and companies are looking for ways to cut expenses. Our mental and physical health also affect our ability to find and maintain employment, as does substance abuse. An accident or a medical issue may not only cause large and unbudgeted expenses, but may also prevent us from working as many hours or from working at all. Our access to transportation and our education are also important. Homeless people often face obstacles to employment such as lack of transportation or educational credentials.

In short, the causes of homelessness are varied and complex, and differ from person to person. Yet the good news is that with so many factors contributing to homelessness, there is something each of us can do to help.

Learn More about the Causes of Homelessness

Click the link or picture to see our slideshow

["Behind Homelessness"](#)



Consequences of Homeless on Families

Photo for illustration only



Most children in homeless families have been exposed to violence. 42% of children in homeless families are younger than six years old.

Family homelessness has been on the rise, with a 13% increase between 2007 and 2009. Homelessness takes a heavy toll on family members.

- Children who experience homelessness are sick four times more often than other kids.
- Nearly half (47%) of homeless school age children have anxiety or depression, compared to 18% of other school age children.
- About 50% of mothers who experience homelessness subsequently experience a major depressive episode.
- Homeless women are less likely to receive prenatal care and infants born into homelessness are at increased risk of low birth weight and death.

Getting Involved: Ways We Can Help Prevent Homelessness

Homelessness is related to several other matters of social justice, which means that there are many different ways we can work to help prevent it. For instance:

- We can work to prevent domestic violence and child abuse. Violence against women is a leading cause of homelessness among women. Teach your children about healthy relationships. [Click for more ways you can help end domestic violence.](#) Violence can also contribute to homelessness among youth. Leaving home, including running away, is one way that young people become homeless, and youth who leave often do so because of a severe conflict in the home, which may include abuse.
- We can work to support the children who age out of the foster care system. Many of us continued to rely on our parents or family after we turn 18, but the 29,000 young people who age out of the foster care system each year may have no one to turn to for advice or support. Many end up homeless within a few years. Consider becoming a mentor.
- We can work to increase high school graduation rates and to help people who have dropped out of school get their GED. Families experiencing homelessness often have limited education. For instance, over half of homeless mothers do not have a high school diploma.



Photo for illustration only

Between 2001 and 2007, affordable, unassisted rental housing stock in the United States decreased by 6.3%, while high-rent housing stock increased by 94.3%.



Photo for illustration only

Between 22% and 57% of homeless women report that domestic or sexual violence caused their homelessness. (Percentage depends on the region and type of study)

Getting to Know Our Neighbors

Another way that we can help prevent homelessness is by helping out members of our community who may be at an increased risk of becoming homeless. If we get to know the people in our parish or neighborhood, we help form part of their support network if they start to experience hard times.

For instance, we may be able to help a single parent keep his or her job (and a place to live) by offering to baby-sit during school vacations. Or perhaps we can act as a mentor to a new or young parent to help them adjust to the responsibilities of parenthood and learn constructive ways to discipline their children. Just being available to listen to someone who is going through a hard time can be a tremendous help to that person. In short, sometimes a

little help along the way can help prevent a setback from turning into a crisis. Consider the following hypothetical situation:

Mary lives in an area without public transportation and has to drive to work. One day, her car breaks down. It takes two days to fix, and unable to afford a rental, take public transportation or get a ride with a friend, Mary misses two days of work. Her boss has to scramble to find a substitute, and irritated, schedules Mary for fewer hours, which makes it hard for her to pay her bills. Mary falls behind in rent, and eventually faces eviction.

How might that story have changed if a neighbor had offered to drive Mary to work for those two days while her car was being repaired?

Getting Involved: Ways We Can Help People Who Are Homelessness

- **Participate in or organize a food, clothing or hygiene item drive** to benefit a local shelter. If you are organizing the drive, be sure to contact the shelter first to find out what items they need.
- **Volunteer** at a local shelter or soup kitchen. Not sure how to find a volunteer opportunity? Check to see what opportunities are available through your parish.
- **Learn about homelessness and work to raise awareness** in your community. Talk about homelessness with your family and friends, write about it on your blog, link to videos or news stories of people who are homeless on your Facebook page, etc.
- **Donate your professional services or expertise** to benefit people who are homeless. Are you a teacher? See if the local shelter needs volunteer tutors for the children living there. Are you a barber or hair dresser? Contact your local shelter and let them know you're willing to donate free hair cuts to help people who are preparing to interview for jobs.
- **Advocate.** Is your city trying to revitalize an area currently frequented by homeless people? If so, find out how this plan affects the homeless and advocate for an approach that helps overcome homelessness instead of one that tries to hide the issue (for instance, by arresting homeless people to encourage them to move to a different section of town).
- **Refuse to judge.** Remember, only God can judge a person. When you see someone who is homeless, instead of judging them or assuming it's their fault, say a prayer for them.
- **Clean out your closets.** Make time to periodically go through your closets and to donate any clothes or toys (in good condition) that you do not use anymore or have outgrown.

The Importance of Prayer

Do you want to help but don't think you can? Perhaps you are struggling to pay your bills and can't afford to buy extra items to donate, or maybe you are facing health issues or demands on your time that prevent you from volunteering. No matter your particular situation, you can always help promote social justice through your prayers. Here are a couple ways to include more prayer in your day:

- When saying grace before a meal, include a prayer for people who do not know what or when they will eat next.
- Try praying for the needs of others while you do household chores or when you find yourself waiting in line.
- Are you praying for someone who is going through a hard time? Share your prayer intentions with us through our [online shrine](#).

Why?

*"On the street I saw a small girl
cold and shivering in a thin dress,
with little hope of a
decent meal.*

*I became angry and said to
God:*

*'Why did you permit this?
Why don't you do something
about it?'*

*For awhile God said nothing.
That night he replied, quite
suddenly:*

*'I certainly did something
about it.*

I made you.' "

Author Unknown



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Volunteering: Respecting Dignity, Seeing the “Invisible”

Respecting human dignity is one of the fundamental principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Each one of us is created in the image and likeness of God, and therefore each and every human being has dignity and must be respected. Yet how do we live out respect for the dignity of others in our busy, daily lives? One way is by making an effort to see people who may all too easily become invisible to us, such as people who are homeless.

Perhaps there are not many homeless people in our town, or maybe we just do not go to those parts of town where we know we will have to pass homeless people on the street. How often do we *try* not to see people who are homeless? Do we walk on the other side of the street, or avert our eyes as we pass by? Do we pretend not to hear when someone on the sidewalk asks for our spare change or for the leftovers we are taking home from the restaurant? At the same time, how can we “see” and reach out to people who may be suffering from poor mental health or addiction without risking our own or other’s safety? One possibility is by volunteering, for instance at a homeless shelter or soup kitchen.

Volunteering serves several important purposes. It can educate us, by exposing us to a reality of which we may have previously been unaware. It can raise our awareness of issues in our community and help us see the people who are directly affected by these issues. It may be relatively easy for us never to meet a homeless person in our daily lives, but when we volunteer to help people who are homeless, we gain a greater awareness of the problem and of the challenges some of our brothers and sisters face.



Volunteering also gives us a chance to help and serve others within a more structured environment. While it may not be safe to stop and have a conversation on the street, it should be safe to at least acknowledge another’s presence within a well-run volunteer program. Our attitude can make all the difference. When we volunteer to serve dinner at a soup kitchen, do we pour the soup silently and studiously avoid looking at the person we are serving, or do we smile and say “your welcome” when they thank us? When we help others, are we doing so in a way that respects their human dignity?

When done well, volunteering has benefits for everyone involved. As volunteers, we help meet the needs of our brothers and sisters in the Lord who are struggling, and we do so in a way that respects their dignity as children of God. The people we serve educate us, help us open our eyes to the challenges faced by some people in our community and give us a chance to put our faith in action, to be an instrument of God’s love.

Tell us what you think!

How can we prevent homelessness in our community? What are some of ways we can help people who are homeless?



Email Br. Warren at jpica@misacor-usa.org.

Please Join Us in Prayer

Please join us in prayer for the 1.6 billion men, women and children around the world who have inadequate housing or are completely homeless, and that as a society, we may come together to recognize and meet their needs.



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