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Why Are There More Homeless Men Than Women?

Daniel Myrick · Wednesday, November 2nd, 2016

Are there more homeless men than women?

It is commonly reported that the homeless population is predominantly male. According to the most recent [SAMHSA report](#), the homeless population was approximately 51% single men and 24% single women. Another 23% are families, often single mothers and their children.

A factor that can make it difficult to determine true statistics on homelessness broken down by gender is the general inability to track the homeless population. There are said to be more than [14,000 homeless women in LA county](#), but no one really knows where they are there. They don't want to identify as homeless because there is an increased risk of being attacked. They often don't stay in shelters or anywhere near where men are. Women often dress like men, whatever it takes to blend in. They hide for safety by sleeping in cars and even sleep in the daytime to be alert at night.

What causes homelessness?

There is an issue with how America perceives homelessness. Public perception is generally unfavorable toward homelessness. Many people engage in victim-blaming and see the cause as laziness and substance abuse. These views are dangerous and problematic, dismissing the numerous other causes that often lead to homelessness.

Laziness is hard to define, much less quantify, but substance abuse can be sort of tracked. Per the SAMSA report, 34.7% of the homeless population has substance abuse problems. That's considerably higher than among non-homeless, which is estimated at 9.4%.

Substance abuse is not exclusive to homelessness. It is hard to consider addiction as a cause of homelessness rather than the opposite that homelessness can help facilitate addiction problems. SAMSA also reports that twice as many adult men use drugs as adult women. This ratio correlates with the overall male to female homeless population numbers.

While it is undoubtedly true that addiction can cause homelessness in many instances, blaming victims is no real way to correct problems. Understanding the litany of other issues that can result in homelessness would help give an understanding on how someone could make a real difference.

While employment is a big factor in the ability to house oneself or a family, a job is not a guarantee that a person can avoid homelessness. In fact, 44% of homeless people do have jobs working on average 30 hours per week. As low as pay is in some states, so many poor people have to make budgetary decisions and housing is a major expense that can fund other things such as child care, or healthcare.

Affordable health care, lack of public assistance, mental illness, all have as big of an impact and employment and addictions on how people become homeless. As well, natural disasters, teenager evictions, redevelopment (aka gentrification), domestic violence and many other social

complications have extreme consequences that are beyond most people's control. Effectively, a good number of people become homeless for no other reason than being poor.

Simply put there is a lot of luck involved keeping a given poor person from the streets. Most people in the country are one paycheck, or one medical emergency away from being homeless. These factors, several of which affect men more than women, would figure to lead to more men being homeless.

A gender issue?

The divide of poor versus rich is a bad enough situation, but this issue seems to be a rally cry for men's rights groups and homeless advocates. A Voice For Men is certain that [misandry creates homelessness](#), or at least exacerbates it.

They point to a crucial factor that most veterans, particularly those returning from combat duty, are men. [Veterans present many complications](#) with mental health crisis, job placements, broken families, and such problems that lead to extreme conditions such as homelessness or suicide.

Another factor to higher numbers of male homeless is that women are streamlined out of the system. A men's rights subgroup on Reddit has some [controversial perspectives](#), including this one from a homeless male, "I've been homeless. 8 years of it. This is bullshit. I'd say 10% are female. Don't even get me started on the inequality of it. Women get to come and go at the shelter. Men are herded like cattle. A woman goes in and asks for a job they get career training, good references and a foot in the door. A man asks for a job they get put on a list of maybe 50-100 guys for maybe 20 jobs a day that pay \$10 per hour for hard labor."

It's also true that social services will extend services for helping children first and foremost. Since most homeless families have mothers, and often only the mother, they receive services over single males.

Should it be a big deal that more men are homeless?

Men's rights groups seem to want to focus on how to help the male homeless population. To that end, perhaps, yes focusing on the issues that create homelessness is a good thing, but complicating the situation by adding fodder to a gender war is not much help.

Apparently, there are men who feel that no one cares about the plight of men. Sure, when we speak of domestic violence, we generally think of women as victims. But even though we may focus a little more on women, does that make the problem of homelessness worse for men?

On the other hand, maybe it's appropriate to focus on homeless women. When we consider the root causes of homelessness being based on income, violence and other oppression, we can quickly figure out that these are [issues that affect women more](#). Despite the advances of the last 100 years, women still are paid unequally, have fewer work incentives, sexual discrimination and face similar hardships in employment. That considered, we must wonder how bad the female homeless population would look if they didn't get extra services.

In the end, homelessness is a gender neutral issue. Even women who are hiding from the statistical count or not considered homeless are not necessarily in a better position. Fleeing the streets to an abusive relationship would not be a step up. And certainly, if a woman is homeless with children, it makes all the sense that children be taken care of first.

Society doesn't have to care whether a homeless person is a man or a woman. What's really going to make a difference is to fix the economics; unemployment, the housing market and one-percenters hoarding the wealth and the host of actual problems. But it's easier for people to blame things on others and talk about why and what something is rather than just dealing with it.

That is not to say that there isn't a lot of work to be done as far as public perceptions of the lives of

men, as well as all homeless people. Absolutely, the thinking that men can't be victims of domestic violence, that men can't be homeless with children, or that men don't suffer numerous other problems needs to be addressed. We can't operate off of stereotypes, but at the same time there are trends and that's what we follow.

Image: Homeless tents beside 101 freeway, Los Angeles. Processed photo by Adam Leipzig

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