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## **BEYOND STIGMA AND STEREOTYPES: WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS?**

In November 2014, the National Center on Family Homelessness reported that one child in every thirty—or 2.5 million children in the U.S.—were homeless at some point in 2013. Many advocates blame the country’s high poverty rate on a lack of affordable housing, among other causes. Even though the child homeless rate is at an all-time high, people who are homeless are typically hidden away from the general population and many young people are not aware of the issues of homelessness, unless they are homeless themselves. In addition, there is a lot of misunderstanding by the general public about who is homeless and the causes for homelessness. As a society, we have a stereotypical view of homeless people (e.g. alcoholics, drug addicts, dangerous, mentally ill) and there is a profound stigma around being homeless in the United States. Further, targeted violence against homeless people is a serious national issue.

This middle school lesson provides an opportunity for students to gain an understanding of who is homeless, the reasons people become homeless and the ways in which homeless people are victims of violence and harassment. Students will also explore how, as a society, we stigmatize and stereotype people who are homeless.

**[NOTE TO TEACHER:** It is important to reflect on and consider that you may have students in your classroom who are homeless, living in shelters/transitional housing or whose housing situation is insecure. Be prepared and sensitive to those students and do not teach this lesson if you think it will make them uncomfortable. Sometimes students in this situation feel relieved to talk about something so personal and others may feel uncomfortable, awkward and embarrassed. It is also possible that if the student has not shared this previously, she or he may disclose it during the course of the lesson. That information should only come from the student directly. If a student has disclosed to you that they are homeless, you may want to talk with them or their parents in advance of the lesson.]

**Grade Level:** grades 6–8

**Time:** 45–60 minutes

**Common Core Anchor Standards:** Reading, Speaking and Listening

**Learning Objectives:**

- Students will identify and reflect on the stereotypes and stigma associated with being homeless.
- Students will gain knowledge about the demographics of the homeless population, the main reasons why people become homeless and the violence sometimes directed at people who are homeless.
- Students will explore what they can do about the stereotypes and violence directed at homeless people and will begin to develop an action plan.

**Material:**

- *Post-It Notes*® (three per student)
- *Homeless People Share Their Stories, One Piece of Cardboard at a Time* video (1½ mins., 2014, [www.people.com/article/homeless-stories-video](http://www.people.com/article/homeless-stories-video))
- “Ron and Carla” and “Marcus” audio recordings from “The Lives of America’s Homeless” (*The Atlantic*, June 5, 2014, [www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/06/the-lives-of-americas-homeless/371847/](http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/06/the-lives-of-americas-homeless/371847/))
- [“Ten Facts about Being Homeless in USA”](#) (Common Dreams, October 14, 2014)
- [Fact Sheet about Homelessness](#)
- [Action Plan](#)

**Vocabulary:**

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL’s [“Glossary of Education Terms.”](#))

- abandoned
- abusive
- addiction
- affordable
- criminalizing
- harassment
- homeless
- illegal
- mental illness
- perpetrators
- population
- poverty
- public housing
- stereotype
- stigma
- subsidized housing
- transitional
- unsheltered
- veteran
- violence

**WHAT IS HOMELESSNESS AND HOW DO WE SEE AND STEREOTYPE HOMELESS PEOPLE?**

1. Ask students: *What is homelessness? What does it mean to be homeless?* Record their responses on the board/smartboard. Explain that the category of “homelessness” includes people who (1) lack a regular nighttime residence, (2) use a car, park, abandoned building, subway station, etc. as a place to sleep, (3) live in a supervised temporary shelter or (4) are unaccompanied youth and families who have not lived in permanent housing long-term and have experienced ongoing instability (i.e. moving around often).
2. Ask students: *What is a stereotype?* Allow for a few minutes of sharing and discussion. Come to a definition of stereotype as: *An oversimplified generalization about a person or group of people without regard for individual differences. Even seemingly positive stereotypes that link a person or group to a specific positive trait can have negative consequences.* Ask students if they can think of an example and provide one if necessary (e.g. girls and women don’t like and aren’t good at sports).

Ask students: *What is a stigma?* Allow for a few minutes of discussion. Share definition of stigma as: *A set of extremely negative and often unfair societal beliefs about a group of people or something.* Ask for an example of a group of people who are stigmatized in our society and what that stigma is. Provide an example if necessary (e.g. people who are overweight are stigmatized by society; people think they are lazy and have many negative associations attributed to them).

3. Distribute three *Post-it*® *Notes* to each student. Instruct students to use the *Post-it*® *Notes* to write stereotypes they have seen or heard about homeless people and/or the ways in which homeless people

are stigmatized in our society. They should use one post-it note for each thought or stereotype. Explain that their examples can include how homeless people are stereotyped and stigmatized in the media and in everyday life. Be sure to acknowledge to students that just because they write the stereotype down does not mean they believe the stereotype. Give students five minutes to complete this task.

Some examples may include: drug addict, dirty, poor, alcoholic, just trying to get money from me, begging, criminals, mentally ill, lazy, bad choices, single men, strange, abused, smell bad, bag lady, no job/unemployed, dangerous, crazy, abusive, scary

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**NOTE:** It is important to remember that the emphasis of this lesson is to deconstruct and dispel stereotypes about people who are homeless. In conducting the following activity, be careful not to allow the stereotypes to get perpetuated. To do this, ask the discussion questions following the activity (#5), continue to emphasize that stereotypes are unfair and oversimplified generalizations about people that are often based on limited experience and explain that they will learn more about homeless people in the lesson to challenge those stereotypes.

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4. After students have filled out the post-its, have them place their notes on a designated wall or the board, either as a group or by calling them up one row or table at a time. After all the students have posted their notes, you should spend a few minutes grouping the notes together if there are duplicates and also organize the words that are connected or related to one another. Have students do a “gallery walk” in order to read all the stereotypes and stigmas associated with homelessness.
5. Engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
  - How did you feel while looking at the words?
  - What do you notice about the words you see?
  - What do we, as a society, think and feel about homeless people?
  - Where do these stereotypes come from?
  - How are the stereotypes of homeless people perpetuated?
  - Does anyone have any experience that dispels any of the stereotypes?
  - How are the stereotypes unfair and/or generalizations?

## THE FACES AND VOICES OF PEOPLE WHO ARE HOMELESS

1. Explain to students that they are going to learn more about people who are homeless by watching a video and listening to recordings of homeless people speaking. Show the video [Homeless People Share Their Stories, One Piece of Cardboard at a Time](#). This video shows the faces of homeless people in order to humanize them and challenge/dispel stereotypes about people who are homeless. As students watch the video, have them jot down thoughts and feelings that come to mind while watching.
2. After watching the video, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
  - How did you feel while watching the video?
  - What did you see?
  - Was there any person or picture that stood out for you? Why?
  - Did the video challenge, dispel or confirm stereotypes? Please explain.

3. Play two audio recordings, “Ron and Carla” and “Marcus” in *The Atlantic* article “[The Lives of America’s Homeless](#).” Each recording is less than two minutes and shares the story of how a person or family came to be homeless and what their life is like. After playing each of the audio recordings, engage students in a discussion by asking the following questions:
  - How did \_\_\_\_\_ become homeless?
  - What is \_\_\_\_\_’s situation now?
  - What surprised you about the story?
  - What other questions do you have?
  - Does it challenge, dispel or confirm stereotypes?

### READING ACTIVITY

1. Explain to students that they are going to learn more about homeless people in the United States—who they are, the reasons people become homeless and some of the violence targeted towards homeless people. Distribute the article “[Ten Facts about Being Homeless in USA](#)” to each student and point out and define vocabulary for which students may be unfamiliar. Have students read silently for 10 minutes. Ask if there are any clarifying questions.
2. Divide students into small groups of 4–5 each. Select a recorder (who will take notes) and a presenter (who will share the group ideas with the rest of the class). Have students discuss the reading by each one responding to the following three questions and recording them on paper:
  - What surprised you the most?
  - What did you already know?
  - What other questions do you have?
3. Have each group’s presenter share their responses to the questions and anything else they discussed in their small groups.

### INFORMATION SHARING

1. Ask students the following questions and record their responses on the board/smartboard:
  - What do you think are the main reasons people become homeless?
  - Who do you think are the majority of homeless people?
  - What are some ways in which homeless people are targeted and victimized by violence?
2. After sharing their responses, read aloud the [Fact Sheet about Homelessness](#) handout, having students take turns reading.
3. After reading, engage students in a discussion by asking:
  - What is your reaction to what we read?
  - What did you already know?
  - What surprised you about what you learned?
  - How do you feel about what you learned?

- What do you think can be done about the violence that targets homeless people?

### ACTION PLANNING: WHAT CAN WE DO

1. Explain to students that now that they know more about homeless people, they are going to consider what actions they can take to address how our society views and portrays homeless people and how homeless people are victimized by violence and harassment. Ask students: *What are some things we can do about stereotypes about and violence directed at people who are homeless?*
2. Brainstorm ideas using [10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism](#) for inspiration. Some ideas may include the following:
  - Volunteer in a homeless shelter or soup kitchen
  - Plan an information session for other students and members of the school or community
  - Have a homeless non-profit organization provide information
  - Conduct a survey to find out what students think about homeless people
  - Conduct an analysis of how homeless people are portrayed in the media
3. Have students self-select one of the ideas and designate small groups to work on developing each of them in more depth, using the [Action Plan](#) handout to begin to plan out their ideas. Encourage students to think about realistic strategies they can implement in their school and/or community. After the small groups have had a few minutes to develop some preliminary ideas, have each group share some of them with the whole class. As a long-term project, pursue one or more of these ideas as individual, group or class projects.

### CLOSING

Have students share a word or a phrase that describes something they learned in today's lesson. If time permits, record their words/phrases and make it into a poem.

### ADDITIONAL READING AND RESOURCES

- [The 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report \(AHAR\) to Congress](#) (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development)
- ["Study: 1 in 30 U.S. Kids Were Homeless During 2013"](#) (*Time*, November 17, 2014)
- ["Homeless Rates in U.S. Held Level Amid Recession, Study Says, but Big Gains Are Elusive"](#) (*The New York Times*, December 10, 2012)
- [The State of Homelessness in American 2013](#) (National Alliance to End Homelessness)
- ["The Lives of America's Homeless"](#) (*The Atlantic*, June 5, 2014)
- [National Coalition for the Homeless](#)
- ["Heartbreaking Murals Tell True Stories of Homeless Youth"](#) (*The Huffington Post*, March 28, 2014)
- ["A Look Into The 'Double Lives' Of America's Homeless College Students"](#) (*The Huffington Post*, December 26, 2014)


- [America’s Youngest Outcasts: A Report Card on Child Homelessness](#) (The National Center on Family Homelessness)
- [Faces of Homelessness](#) (14 mins., 2011, The National Coalition for the Homeless)

## COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Reading
Standard 1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

# TEN FACTS ABOUT BEING HOMELESS IN USA

by [Bill Quigley](#)

 [commondreams.org/views/2014/10/14/ten-facts-about-being-homeless-usa](http://commondreams.org/views/2014/10/14/ten-facts-about-being-homeless-usa)  
Published on Tuesday, October 14, 2014 by [Common Dreams](#)



On any given night, there are over 600,000 homeless people in the United States. (Photo: [Garry Knight](#)/cc/flickr)

## THREE TRUE STORIES

Renee Delisle was one of over 3500 homeless people in Santa Cruz when she found out she was pregnant. [The Santa Cruz Sentinel](#) reported she was turned away from a shelter because they did not have space for her. While other homeless people slept in cars or under culverts, Renee ended up living in an abandoned elevator shaft until her water broke.

Jerome Murdough, 56, a homeless former Marine, was arrested for trespass in New York because he was found sleeping in a public housing stairwell on a cold night. [The New York Times](#) reported that one week later, Jerome died of hypothermia in a jail cell heated to over 100 degrees.

Paula Corb and her two daughters lost their home and have lived in their minivan for four years. They did laundry in a church annex, went to the bathroom at gas stations, and did their studies under street lamps, according to [America Tonight](#).

## FACT ONE. OVER HALF A MILLION PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS

On any given night, there are over 600,000 homeless people in the US [according to the US Department of Housing and Urban Development \(HUD\)](#). Most people are either spending the night in homeless shelters or

in some sort of short term transitional housing. Slightly more than a third are living in cars, under bridges or in some other way living unsheltered.

### **FACT TWO. ONE QUARTER OF HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE CHILDREN**

HUD reports that on any given night [over 138,000 of the homeless in the US are children](#) under the age of 18. Thousands of these homeless children are unaccompanied according to HUD. Another federal program, No Child Left Behind, [defines homeless children more broadly](#) and includes not just those living in shelters or transitional housing but also those who are sharing the housing of other persons due to economic hardship, living in cars, parks, bus or train stations, or awaiting foster care placement. Under this definition, the National Center for Homeless Education reported in September 2014 that local school districts reported there are [over one million homeless children in public schools](#).

### **FACT THREE. TENS OF THOUSANDS OF VETERANS ARE HOMELESS**

Over [57,000 veterans are homeless](#) each night. Sixty percent of them were in shelters, the rest unsheltered. Nearly 5000 are female.

### **FACT FOUR. DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IS A LEADING CAUSE OF HOMELESSNESS IN WOMEN**

More than [90% of homeless women are victims of severe physical or sexual abuse](#) and escaping that abuse is a leading cause of their homelessness.

### **FACT FIVE. MANY PEOPLE ARE HOMELESS BECAUSE THEY CANNOT AFFORD RENT**

The [lack of affordable housing is a primary cause of homelessness](#) according to the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. HUD has seen its budget slashed by over 50% in recent decades resulting in the loss of 10,000 units of subsidized low income housing each and every year.

### **FACT SIX. THERE ARE FEWER PLACES FOR POOR PEOPLE TO RENT THAN BEFORE**

[One eighth of the nation's supply of low income housing has been permanently lost](#) since 2001. The US needs at [least 7 million more affordable apartments](#) for low income families and as a result millions of families spend more than half their monthly income on rent.

### **FACT SEVEN. IN THE LAST FEW YEARS MILLIONS HAVE LOST THEIR HOMES**

[Over five million homes have been foreclosed](#) on since 2008, one out of every ten homes with a mortgage. This has caused even more people to search for affordable rental property.

### **FACT EIGHT. THE GOVERNMENT DOES NOT HELP AS MUCH AS YOU THINK**

There is enough [public rental assistance to help about one out of every four extremely low income](#) households. Those who do not receive help are on multi-year waiting lists. For example, Charlotte just [opened up their applications for public housing assistance for the first time in 14 years and over 10,000 people applied](#).



## FACT NINE. ONE IN FIVE HOMELESS PEOPLE SUFFER FROM UNTREATED SEVERE MENTAL ILLNESS

While about 6% of the general population suffers from severe mental illness, [20 to 25% of the homeless suffer from severe mental illness](#) according to government studies. Half of this population self-medicate and are at further risk of addiction and poor physical health. A [University of Pennsylvania study tracking nearly 5000 homeless people for two years](#) discovered that investing in comprehensive health support and treatment of physical and mental illnesses is less costly than incarceration, shelter and hospital services for the untreated homeless.

## FACT TEN. CITIES ARE INCREASINGLY MAKING HOMELESSNESS A CRIME

A [2014 survey of 187 cities by the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty](#) found: 24% make it a city-wide crime to beg in public; 33% make it illegal to stand around or loiter anywhere in the city; 18% make it a crime to sleep anywhere in public; 43% make it illegal to sleep in your car; and 53% make it illegal to sit or lay down in particular public places. And the number of cities criminalizing homelessness is steadily increasing.

For more information look to the [National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty](#), the [National Center for Homeless Education](#) and the [National Coalition on the Homeless](#).



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# FACT SHEET ABOUT HOMELESSNESS

## How Do People Become Homeless?

### HOUSING

- A lack of affordable housing and the limited amount of housing assistance programs have contributed to the current housing crisis and to homelessness.

### POVERTY

- Homelessness and poverty are connected. Poor people are frequently unable to pay for housing, food, childcare, health care and education so they have to make difficult choices because they have limited resources. Because housing often costs the most, it gets dropped.
- In 2011, the official poverty rate was 15.0%. There were 46.2 million people in poverty. The two main factors which account for increasing poverty are lack of employment opportunities and decline in public assistance.

### OTHER MAJOR FACTORS

- **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.
- **Domestic Violence:** Battered women who live in poverty are often forced to choose between abusive relationships and homelessness. 50% of the cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors identified domestic violence as a primary cause of homelessness.
- **Mental Illness:** Approximately 16% of the single adult homeless population suffers from some form of mental illness.

*(From [Why Are People Homeless?](#), National Coalition for the Homeless)*

### WHO IS HOMELESS?

- The [U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development](#) (HUD) found 610,042 individuals to be homeless on a single night in January 2013.
- Most homeless people (85%) are individuals; 15% of homeless people are in family households.
- 33% of all homeless people were youths under the age of 24.
- 57,849 veterans, overwhelmingly 92% male, were homeless on a single night in January 2013.
- 60% of homeless people resided in shelters or transitional housing programs, while 40% were without shelter.
- Families experiencing homelessness made up 50% of those who were sheltered.
- 40% of the homeless youth served by agencies identify as LGBT

*(From [Demographics of Homelessness](#), National Coalition for the Homeless)*

## HOW HOMELESS PEOPLE ARE TARGETED AND VICTIMIZED

The National Coalition for the Homeless found alarming data in the number and severity of attacks against homeless people. The reports acknowledge that since homeless people are treated so poorly in our society, many more attacks are not reported at all. Within the last 15 years, their data show that:

- 1,437 reported acts of bias motivated violence have been committed against homeless individuals and 375 of these individuals have lost their lives as a result of the attacks.
- Perpetrators of these attacks are almost always male, younger than 30, and most commonly teenage boys. 85% of all perpetrators documented in the last 15 years have been under the age of 30.
- The most common victim is a middle-aged male; 65% of victims were 40 years old or older and 90% of all victims are male.
- Non-lethal attacks/violence include beatings, fire, use of a deadly weapon, rape and sexual assault, harassment and police brutality

*(From [Vulnerable to Hate: A Survey of Hate Crimes and Violence Committed Against Homeless People in 2013](#), National Coalition for the Homeless)*

- The federal government and many states have laws with stiff criminal penalties when the victim is intentionally selected for violence on the basis of his/her homeless status. These are often referred to as “vulnerable victim” statutes, which typically protect elderly and disabled individuals and others who are especially vulnerable to crime.

# ACTION PLAN

Brainstorm different ideas on what you can do to address how our society views and portrays homeless people and how homeless people are victimized by violence and harassment hate crimes in your school or community. Create an action plan for implementing your idea using the grid below.

IDEA:		
ACTIVITIES	PEOPLE AND RESOURCES NEEDED	TIMELINE