

Homelessness Facts V Myths

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: “All homeless people have a mental illness or are on drugs”

FACT: Based on annual Homeless Counts year-to-year, approximately 25-30% of those experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness, and approximately 30% have a substance use disorder

Many self-medicate with drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism for surviving on the streets, with research showing substance use is more likely to be a result of homelessness, rather than a cause

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: People on the streets don't want help, they like that lifestyle and the freedom

FACT: No one wants to be homeless: it's dangerous, stressful, and humiliating.

Living on the streets statistically shortens one's life, "aging" people by 20-30 years. In 2020, more than 1,300 people have *died on the streets* of LA County.

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: Arresting the homeless is the best solution

FACT: It is not against the law to be homeless

- The 2019 “Boise” court decision upheld the Ninth Circuit’s 2006 ruling that persons experiencing homelessness cannot be punished for sleeping on the streets when there are not adequate local shelter options
- Arresting people for petty “nuisance” crimes might take people off the streets temporarily, but they are quickly released from jail
- This cycle burdens the justice system and provides no real, lasting solutions

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: Homeless people are dangerous -- they're all criminals!

FACT: People who are homeless are more likely to be victims of a crime than to commit a crime, especially among women and young adults

- There is an alarming trend in the South Bay that they are becoming the targets of gangs
- It is important that we not vilify people without homes, but instead, see them as neighbors in need of shelter and housing

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: Homeless people are just lazy -- they need to get a job!

FACT: Many have full-time jobs but do not earn enough to pay for the high cost of LA housing. According to recent Homeless Counts, about 60% of newly homeless individuals cite economic hardship for the reason they become homeless.

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: *Most people experiencing homelessness are from out of town*

FACT: Annual Los Angeles Homeless Counts consistently show that LA is home to the vast majority of those experiencing homelessness:

- Approximately 80% of unsheltered Angelenos have been here for more than 5 years
- Approximately 70% have been in LA County over 10 years

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: *We did not see any homeless families during the Homeless Count, so there must not be many experiencing homelessness.*

FACT: Families know how to stay well-hidden -- they are afraid their children will be taken from them! Unsheltered families are more commonly living in vehicles than in tents.

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: *There aren't many kids who are homeless.*

FACT: Educators struggle to meet the needs of homeless children and teens -- at the end of the 2018-19 school year there were so many that they could fill Dodgers Stadium to capacity five times over ([269,000 K-12 students](#)). *(UCLA report, Center for the Transformation of Schools)*

This does not include transitional youth aged 16-24 who have fallen out of the foster care system or were kicked out of their home because of their sexual orientation. *(4,775 in 2019; LAHSA)*

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: *They just made bad choices*

FACT: People's actions are often influenced by circumstances beyond their control, such as losing a job, being a victim of domestic violence, and having a physical or mental disability

- People experiencing homelessness live in “survival mode” day-to-day, finding it very difficult to make longer range plans
- Their daily frame-of-mind is often about how to find food and water, and how to stay relatively safe avoiding dangerous street situations

FACT v MYTH

MYTH: Homeless people don't need cell phones -- those are a luxury?

FACT: People experiencing homelessness typically have a basic cell phone that they received free through government programs. Like us, phones are the way they stay connected to the world.

- They access the Internet where it is free, such as in libraries, fast food eateries, and coffee shops
- Phones are a lifeline to their case manager, to employment and housing opportunities

FACT v FICTION

MYTH: *We don't know how to end homelessness*

FACT: The good news is we do know how to end homelessness. Using a proven method called “Housing First,” we know through several national and local studies, that getting people into stable housing without preconditions and then following up with supportive services and treatment provides successful long-lasting solutions.

- The primary challenge in ending homelessness in LA County is the severe lack of affordable housing, making it difficult to find units for rent.
- There is also a severe lack of rental subsidies for people who need them.