

Homelessness Handout

The Causes of Modern Homelessness



We have come to accept the term "homelessness" as a new addition to the English language, a term that, one can imagine, might someday be described in Webster's as having "come into common usage during the latter part of the twentieth century"...We have chosen this name because it makes use of the one characteristic common to all of these individuals. But by doing so we suggest that these people are the same, facing identical problems. And it is this suggestion that is at odds with the truth of who the homeless are and how they came to be on the streets.

If we look beyond the term "homelessness," we find a quite diverse group of people and problems:

- An average of 22 percent of homeless individuals are employed either full- or part-time
- One-third of the homeless are families with children
- The city with the highest rate of growth in its homeless population in 1987 (44 percent) was Kansas City, Missouri, not New York or Chicago
- Studies show an explosion in homelessness in the most rural of areas
- Although we have long associated homelessness, to an excessive degree, with mental disability, current statistics indicate that only approximately 30 percent of the homeless fall into this group

In understanding that the homeless are actually a diverse collection of individuals who have difficulty competing for the basic requirements of life for a variety of reasons, we can begin to address specific problems. A variety of recent studies has suggested that there are four primary causes of homelessness:

- 1) rising rates of unemployment and underemployment, particularly among the