



HOMELESSNESS: *Why it happens and how to end it*

Educator Resources on Homelessness

Acknowledgements

August 2020

Created by Adriana Lombard

Special thanks to

**The Los Angeles County Homeless Initiative
Jennifer Kottke and the Los Angeles County Office of Education, Homeless Education
Letisia Alvarado and the Los Angeles Unified School District, Homeless Education Office
Angela M. Sanchez, Board Member, School on Wheels, Inc.**

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act toward each other with a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 3.

Everyone has a right to life, liberty, and security of person.

Article 5.

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 7.

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any enticement to such discrimination.

Article 17.

(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 25.

(1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.

Framing

What is homelessness and why is it worth talking about?

What is homelessness?

- While there is no universally agreed upon definition of homelessness, it can generally be described as an experience —short-term or chronic—that people face when they do not have secure, affordable and safe living accommodations. The risk of homelessness increases as housing becomes unaffordable, unsafe, overcrowded, insecure, inappropriate, poorly maintained or when there is a lack of support necessary to maintain stability. People might experience “hidden” homelessness when they have temporary accommodations, such as living with friends or family. This form of homelessness may also be referred to as **sheltered** or **doubled-up homelessness**.

Why do people experience homelessness?

- There are many reasons people experience homelessness, and they often overlap. Most people experience homelessness because they cannot afford housing. **Affordable housing** units rent for less than the market rate and are reserved for people who earn less than average income, and there is a severe shortage of affordable housing available. As rent and mortgage prices rise, wages often do not keep pace, leaving many people on the brink of homelessness without enough affordable housing to meet demand.
- Homelessness is also the result of systemic racism. The housing and homelessness crisis is deeply informed by a history of segregation and **systemic racism** in public policy, including **redlining**, mass incarceration, income inequality, and **criminalization of poverty**.
- For too long, L.A.’s approach to homelessness was led by underinvestment and **policies** that severely limited real solutions like housing and services. Loopholes in state and local laws allowed for more and more people to be evicted and displaced from their homes. While policy is largely responsible for the housing and homelessness crisis, it can also be used as a tool to implement substantial change to support housing protections, preservation, and production.
- **Other life-altering events**, like domestic violence, exposure to severe trauma, medical illness, mental health disorder or substance use disorder, loss of employment, the loss of a family member, a car accident, and more can cause someone to become housing insecure and fall into homelessness.

Who experiences homelessness?

- People of all ages, races, genders and backgrounds experience homelessness in L.A. County, but Black individuals experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate to other races and ethnicities. For example, the 2020 Homeless Count Results presented by LAHSA report that while Black people make up only 7.9% of the L.A. County population, they make up 33.7% of the homeless population.

Framing (cont'd)

What is the impact of experiencing homelessness on children and adults?

- Overall, homelessness significantly reduces an individual's quality of life. In addition to having poorer mental and physical health, studies have also shown that people experiencing homelessness are more likely to die younger than their housed counterparts. Both children and adults experiencing homelessness are likely to suffer from poor health and nutrition, poor hygiene, low self-esteem, short attention span, or difficulty trusting people. Homelessness severely impacts children's lives, causing education barriers like gaps in knowledge and repetition of material. Children who experience homelessness may have more difficulty completing school work due to lack of resources and unstable living conditions.

How can we end homelessness?

- The most effective way to end homelessness in L.A. County is to build more affordable and supportive housing. Supportive housing is for especially vulnerable people, like those with disabilities or survivors of trauma, who otherwise have difficulty staying in stable housing.
- **Supportive housing** is remarkably effective: 90% of residents stay housed, have improved health and financial stability, and become more self-sufficient. Simply put, supportive housing is the best way to end the most persistent and acute homelessness. It's important to know that supportive housing is safe and fits into the community. Most people who live near supportive housing don't even realize it, because supportive housing structures look no different than other condos or apartment buildings. And because there are professional staff and security on site, supportive housing buildings can actually make the communities around them safer.
- For thousands of people experiencing homelessness, the answer is **affordable housing**. These apartments aren't available to just anyone who can afford them. They're reserved for people who meet specific income criteria, typically 0-80% of the average income in the area— also known as “median income.” The scale slides based on how many people are in the household. Creating affordable housing is a guaranteed way to bring people off the streets while preventing the kind of trauma and economic struggles that could keep them there.

Framing (cont'd)

Why is it important for adults and children to learn about homelessness?

- It is important to educate both adults and children about homelessness in order to implement solutions effectively. People must understand the problem in order to solve it. When children are taught to think critically about complex issues and approach them from an empathetic lens, they are more likely to do their part toward helping to make L.A. County a better place for all to live.

Why is it important to talk about homelessness with our students?

- Children are constantly making observations about the world around them and forming the basis of how they will interact with the world as voters, as neighbors, and as friends.
- Some of your students may be experiencing homelessness right now, it is important for them and their classmates to understand that homelessness is something that happens to people rather than something that people **are**—especially during a time when children and youth are developing their self-perception and self-worth.

How should we talk about homelessness with our students?

- Discuss both facts and feelings
- Validate backgrounds and address feelings of guilt students may have
- Always point focus to action and solutions

Instructions For Use

Guidelines for Educators

- It is important to remember that some of your students may be experiencing homelessness right now. They may feel embarrassed by their circumstances or try to hide this, but it is vital that you know who these children are and honor the wishes of those who prefer non-disclosure. A key part of your role as an educator is to ensure that the classroom atmosphere around discussions of homelessness is respectful and a safe place for students to ask questions and learn constructive and **de-stigmatizing language** and information about homelessness. Please preview all materials and determine which to use based on the needs and context of your classroom. If you notice a student becoming upset by this topic, you might take an opportunity to speak privately with that student.

For any of your students who are currently dealing with homelessness or housing insecurity, there is a table of L.A. County Homeless Liaisons in the appendix of this document. If you are unable to locate your student's representative or your student attends a charter school, please contact HomelessED@lacoe.edu and you will be connected to the correct homeless liaison

There is also a glossary in the appendix of this document that can be used to familiarize your students with new terms associated with homelessness.

Resources for Parents

- [Why is it important to talk to your child about homelessness?](#), Everyone In
- [How to talk to kids about difficult subjects](#), Common Sense Media
- [How to talk with your child about difficult topics](#), HuffPo
- [How to talk with your children about difficult topics](#), Imperfect Families
- [How to talk to your kids about the situation with Iran](#), Time
- Kidlit, These Days - [Episode 20: Homelessness](#)