



# Homelessness Myth Busters

***Myth 1: “Most people experiencing homelessness are from out of town and come here for our great weather.”***

**Fact:** The annual Los Angeles Homeless Counts consistently show that LA is home to the vast majority of those experiencing homelessness within the county:

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

***Myth 2: “People experiencing homelessness are just lazy and need to get a job.”***

**Fact:** Many people experiencing homelessness, especially those living in vehicles, have full-time jobs but just do not earn enough to pay for the high cost of housing in LA. According to recent Homeless Counts, about 60% of newly homeless individuals cite economic hardship for the reason they are without a roof over their heads.

Others have difficulty finding employment, such as those with disabling conditions or with a criminal record. A lack of a permanent address, inconsistent access to showers and transportation challenges add extra barriers toward seeking employment. People of color often find it more difficult to find sustainable employment because of individual prejudice and hidden racism.

***Myth 3: “All homeless people have a mental illness or are on drugs.”***

**Fact:** Based on the Homeless Counts, consistently about 25-30% of the those experiencing homelessness have a severe mental illness. About 30% have a substance use disorder. Many experiencing homelessness self-medicate with drugs or alcohol as a coping mechanism for living on the streets, with research showing substance use is more likely to be a result of homelessness, rather than a cause.

***Myth 4: “Homeless people are dangerous” and “They are all criminals”***

**Fact:** People who are homeless are more likely to be victims of a crime than to commit a crime, especially among women, young adults, and children. There is an alarming trend throughout LA County that they are becoming the targets of gangs, including in suburban areas. It is important that we not vilify people without homes but instead, see them as neighbors in need of shelter and best-fit assistance to help them permanent housing.

***Myth 5: “Arresting the homeless is the best solution”***

**Fact:** It is not against the law to be homeless. Arresting people for petty “nuisance” crimes might take people off the streets for a few days, but they are quickly released from jail. This cycle burdens the justice system and provides no real, lasting solutions.

***Myth 6: “People experiencing domestic violence (DV) just need to leave their abusers and then they’ll be ok.”***

**Fact:** DV is an extremely complicated problem with victims often feeling trapped in the relationship. The Homeless Count shows a consistent rate of about 35% of those homeless have some history of domestic violence. The rate among women is higher at 53% [Note 1]. These are a few reasons victims often return to their abusers [Note 2]:

- **Fear** of what will happen if they decide to leave
- **Believing Abuse is Normal** if they grew in a home where abuse was common
- **Embarrassment or Shame** for how their friends and family will judge them
- **Low Self-Esteem** they feel when the abusive partner constantly puts them down, making it can be easy for the victim to believe those statements and think that the abuse is their fault
- **Love** that victims often feel for their abuser
- **Cultural/Religious Reasons** that define traditional gender roles that may influence them to stay
- **Language Barriers/Immigration Status** causing deportation fears and the inability to express the depth of their situation to others
- **Lack of Money/Resources** making the victim financially dependent on their abusive partner. Without money, access to resources or even a place to go, it can seem impossible for them to leave the relationship especially if children are involved.

[Note 1 Source: 2019 Los Angeles City’s Women’s Need Assessment, <https://fz5.d4b.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/DWC-2019-Los-Angeles-Womens-Needs-Assessment.pdf>]

[Note 2 Source: National Domestic Violence Hotline, thehotline.org]

***Myth 7: “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 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.

***Myth 8: “Homeless people don’t need cell phones and they are a luxury”***

**Fact:** While many of us have expensive smartphones, those experiencing homelessness typically have basic cell phones that they received free through government programs. Like us, phones are the way they stay connected to the world. People living on the streets access the Internet where it is free, like in libraries, fast food eateries, and coffee shops. It is their lifeline to their case manager, and to employment and housing opportunities.

***Myth 9: “They just made bad choices”***

**Fact:** While they may have made unwise choices in the past, these were often influenced by circumstances beyond their control such as losing a job, being a victim of domestic violence, and trauma that strongly influenced those choices.

People experiencing homelessness live in “survival mode” from day-to-day and find it very difficult to make longer range plans. Their daily frame of mind is often about how they are going to find food and water for that day, and how to stay relatively safe and avoid dangerous street situations.

***Myth 10: “People like this ‘lifestyle’ and the freedom it gives them” and “Most people do not want to accept services, including staying at a shelter.”***

**Fact:** No one wants to be homeless: it’s dangerous, stressful, and humiliating. Living on the streets statistically shortens one life, “aging” people by 20 years. In 2019, over 1,000 people died on the streets of LA County. The key to having people accept services is to build trusting relationships with them.

Some people choose to sleep outside rather than go into a shelter for several reasons:

- They can only take a limited amount of their belongs with them
- They may have pets that are not welcomed
- They may not feel safe and vulnerable among so many strangers in the shelter
- They may feel closed-in as beds/cots are typically close to each other
- They may not be welcomed as they have a more serious physical or mental illness
- Because of the lack of shelters in LA County, the closest one to where someone is experiencing homelessness may be several miles from their home, so they feel a real loss of connection with their neighborhood and local case manager as well
- Young adults and often times women feel very uncomfortable in shelters that are not designed exclusively for them
- Families fear they will be separated from their older teenage children as many shelters still partition beds with “female” and “male” sections

(Note: many of these concerns do not exist anymore in several shelters as county policy makers recognize these barriers and have put requirements in place to mitigate against them.)

***Myth 11: “We did not see any families during the Homeless Count so there must not be very many experiencing homelessness”***

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

Another age group, Seniors aged 62+, are unfortunately seeing a rise in homelessness as their fixed income cannot keep pace with rising rents.

***Myth 12: “A city’s homelessness is exasperated by hospital dumping”***

**Fact:** It is against the law for medical providers to “dump” a patient on the streets or at a shelter that cannot provide the necessary follow-up medical care. In 2018, California passed AB1152 that requires hospitals to include plans for coordination of services to shelters, medical care, and behavioral health care in their homeless patient discharge policy.

***Myth 13: “I would never become homeless”***

**Fact:** A USC study found over 60% of Angeleno renters spend over 30% of their income on housing. This means *millions* are considered rent “cost-burdened” according to HUD’s standard. This percentage goes up even higher to nearly 75% of low -income people who fall into this

category. So even a temporary job loss, a major medical expense, unexpected car repair or other emergency could cause financial instability and potentially put many on the path toward homelessness.

[Source: <https://usc.data.socrata.com/stories/s/Rising-Rent-Burden-in-Los-Angeles/4wjy-s7d9/>]