

The 10 Biggest **Myths** On Homelessness in America

1 *Most are mentally ill.*

— Decades of epidemiological research reveals that one-third, at most, have a serious mental illness. De-institutionalization or closure of mental hospitals was initially believed to be a prime cause of homelessness, but this occurred in the 1970s, well before the sharp increase in the 1980s.

2 *The majority abuse drugs and alcohol.*

— It is believed that only about 20 to 40 percent of homeless have a substance abuse issue. In fact, abuse is rarely the sole cause of homelessness and more often is a response to it because living on the street puts the person in frequent contact with users and dealers.

3 *They're dangerous and violent.*

— Homeless persons are far more likely to be the victims of violence than the perpetrators. Of course, some homeless individuals may commit acts of violence beyond self-defense but such acts rarely affect the non-homeless individuals they encounter. To put it another way, any violence by homeless persons is either self-defense or due to the rare violent perpetrator who preys on other homeless people.

4 *They're criminals.*

— Homeless persons are more likely to have criminal justice intervention. However, this is primarily because many of their daily survival activities are criminalized—meaning they might be given a summons or arrested for minor offenses such as trespassing, littering, or loitering.

5 *“Bad choices” led to their homelessness.*

— Everyone makes mistakes, but the descent into homelessness is not necessarily the direct result of “choices.” Far more often a sudden illness or an accident, losing one’s job, or falling into debt leads to eviction—or doubling up with family or friends becomes untenable.

6 *They're not part of “our community.”*

— Surveys have shown 70 to 80 percent of homeless persons are from the local area or lived there for a year or longer before becoming unhoused.



The 10 Biggest **Myths** On Homelessness in America

- 7** ***They prefer the freedom of life on the street.***
 - There is no evidence to support this notion that homeless persons are “service resistant.” Since “Housing First” began in New York City in 1992 at the nonprofit Pathways to Housing, Inc., it became clear that the offer of immediate access to independent housing with support services is welcomed and accepted by most homeless. People on the street often reject the option of crowded, unsafe shelters—not housing in general.
- 8** ***They just need to get a job.***
 - A significant portion of homeless people do have jobs—they just cannot afford to pay rent. **In St. Louis, at our Soulard Shelter, consistently 50-60 percent of the men staying with us have at least one job.** Some have 2-3 jobs. Some receive disability income due to physical or mental problems but still cannot afford rent. For those wanting to work—a common refrain among those interviewed by my research team—the complications of applying for a job with no address, no clean clothes, no place to shower, and the stigma of being homeless (or having a criminal record), make such individuals far less competitive in the low-wage job market.
- 9** ***They spend all their money on drugs and alcohol.***
 - Interviews with street homeless persons show that most of their money goes to buying food and amenities such as socks, hygiene products, and bottled water. Although some do spend money on alcohol or drugs, the same can be said of anyone.
- 10** ***They live in unsanitary conditions because they don’t care.***
 - Living outdoors means having no regular place for bodily functions, to dispose of trash, to store food safely, or to bathe. A homeless person who “cares” has few alternatives. Our research shows that lacking access to a shower is one of the more humiliating aspects of being homeless.

*As identified by NYU Social Work Professor and homelessness scholar Deborah Padgett
Source – <https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2019/september/HomelessQandA.html>*

