



Oh, there's no place
like home for
the holidays...

For most Americans, that familiar line conjures up visions of family gathered together in a cozy living room or around a well-stocked dinner table, immune to the blustery weather outside. But for millions of Americans the carol is just one more slap in the face; there's no place like home for them, period. Many of them struggle to survive the snow and severe temperatures of a "White Christmas" every year. And when you're homeless, there's no such thing as a holiday.

No place like home

After serving with the U.S. Army in Germany, Jacob Mattingly* returned to Minneapolis and struggled to find affordable housing and a job. He also struggled to get his hands on enough beer to make him drunk.

In Germany, Mattingly had grown accustomed to beer with an alcohol content of 18-20 percent, much higher than the average American beer. Back home, he ended up spending virtually all his money in search of the temporary buzz alcohol affords. Drunkenness, pursued as an escape from reality, brought him to the harsh new world of living on the streets.

Mattingly's main source of income while he was homeless was the sale of his own plasma, which yielded \$15 per visit to the blood bank. But the money was gone even before the evening was over, spent on bus fare, a fee to cash the check, a pack of cigarettes, a 12-pack of beer and one fast food meal.

Riding the bus back through downtown Minneapolis with pockets as empty as ever, Mattingly found the city's holiday lights did nothing to cheer him. "It wasn't Christmas anymore," he says. "Christmas didn't even matter. It was just another day to survive."

The National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty reports that more than 3 million men, women and children were homeless over the past year — about 30 percent of them long-term and the others temporarily.

According to a U.S. Conference of Mayors study, 20 percent of the homeless population works, 22 percent are mentally disabled, 11 percent are veterans (which translates into 40 percent of homeless men), and 34 percent of the homeless are drug or alcohol dependent. But the main cause of homelessness is unaffordable housing for the poor.

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Families with children are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population.

The bigger picture

Single men like Mattingly comprise about 41 percent of the urban homeless population, but homeless children are catching up to them,

making up 39 percent of the homeless nationally.

Families with children are the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population. In its 2003 survey of 25 American cities, the U.S. Conference of

Mayors found that families comprised 40 percent of the homeless population. The National Alliance to End Homelessness says that more than 1 million children will experience homelessness this year.

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Homelessness in America: Shattering the myths

What images come to mind when you read the word homeless? Unfortunately, many misconceptions exist regarding who the homeless are and how society should respond to them. Ten common myths are explored below.

1. Most homeless persons are single men.

Families make up the fastest-growing segment of the homeless population. More than a quarter of the homeless are children, and many are young mothers or fathers.

2. Homeless persons are found only in large, urban areas.

No community is immune from poverty and the problems that accompany it. A growing number of homeless people live in small towns and rural areas.

3. All homeless persons are mentally ill or addicted to drugs and alcohol.

People can become homeless for an endless number of reasons. Some are innocent children. Others have physical disabilities. Regardless of the circumstances that lead to their desperate situations, the homeless need our help and compassion, not rejection and condemnation.

4. Homeless persons are dangerous and prone to violence.

Though homeless people are more likely than others to commit nonviolent crimes, such as petty theft, they are statistically less likely to engage in violent criminal activity. They themselves are at increased risk of becoming the victims of assault and other violent crimes.

5. Homeless persons have chosen their way of life.

Many homeless people have experienced lifelong poverty, child abuse, domestic abuse, illness and job loss. Most would like to improve their situation, but they may not have the necessary tools and resources.

6. Homeless persons aren't willing to work.

Many homeless people are employed. Yet minimum wage salaries are often inadequate to pay for food, housing, utilities and other needs, such as medical expenses. As a result, the working poor sometimes fall behind on rent and find themselves evicted from their homes.

7. Giving handouts to homeless persons only encourages their dependence on charity.

Imagine trying to rebuild your life and dignity while simultaneously fighting a lonely battle against hunger, street crime and the elements. The homeless need the support of caring people who will help and mentor them as they make a fresh start.

8. Homeless persons have lived that way for a long time.

Some people think the homeless know no other way of life. However, research indicates that 40 percent of homeless people have been homeless less than six months and 75 percent have been homeless less than two years.

9. Homeless persons aren't like the rest of us.

Chances are, that's what the homeless themselves used to think. The truth is, many of these people work hard, love their children, regret their failures and dream of a better future. Like all people, they are created in God's image and have infinite worth in His sight.

10. There are plenty of agencies that can care for the homeless.

The problem is too big for charitable groups, or even government agencies, to address on their own. The good news is that every person can do something to make a difference. (See the ideas on pages 22-25.) For Christians, assisting persons in need is a mandate. Jesus said that when we help the hurting and destitute, it's as though we minister to Him (Matthew 25:35-40).

— Christina Quick

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On top of the 3 million who were homeless last year, there are an additional 5 million poor people who spend more than half of their income on housing, leaving them on the verge of homelessness.

The problem is not unique to cities. Of the 11 apartments available at Wooster Interfaith Housing Corporation in rural Wooster, Ohio, only three are for single people, the rest being occupied by families.

"Plenty of people come to us to escape domestic violence at their own home," says Julie Ann Fickes, family and child development specialist at Wooster Interfaith. "Also, a lot of factories closed down in the last five years around here. With many people losing their jobs, they have struggled to get their feet under them again."

Natural disasters are not on the typical lists of the most common causes of homelessness, but America's homeless population has surged this year with the hurricanes and flooding.

On top of the 3 million who were homeless last year, there are an additional 5 million poor people who spend more than half of their income on housing, leaving them on the verge of homelessness. All it takes is a missed paycheck, a health crisis or an unpaid bill to push poor families over the edge into homelessness.

Ironically, even with a college degree and a solid resume, Fickes herself can't afford her own housing on her salary. She's living with her parents in the meantime.

"I think about that a lot," she says. "Unaffordable housing is the biggest cause of homelessness, and I can definitely see how."

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, youth ages 16-24 who are not in families have been estimated to comprise as much as 12 percent of the homeless population. Many of these are youth who run away or are thrown out of their homes.

Several studies show a direct link between youth who "graduate" or become too old for the foster care system and those who end up homeless. One study showed that within two to four years of exiting foster care, 25 percent of those children experience homelessness.

Holiday blues and blessings

Jeff Lindeman has been working for more than 26 years at the Linn County Youth Shelter in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, which provides short-term emergency housing for 12- to 17-year-olds.

"The holidays are the most difficult time for all of us, especially the kids," he says. "They are already alienated from family support. Their parents/guardians have issues of their own they're struggling with. There are times when kids are here over the holidays and only have the staff here. It's difficult for the staff as well. They don't get to be with their families either, since this is a 24-hour operation."

In addition to making sure each child receives nice gifts for Christmas, the shelter also facilitates benevolence projects so youth can give back to the community. Last year the shelter was involved in a huge bake sale and donated the resulting money to an AIDS project in the city to buy toiletries that recipients otherwise may not be able to afford.

"It's important for the youth to see that others have needs too," says Lindeman. "Kids really respond when they see that they can help others."

What you can do

You may never have experienced homelessness personally, but there are people in your city who could use your help this holiday season. The following list is a compilation of advice given by Fickes, Lindeman and experts at several nonprofit organizations for the homeless.

1) *Get involved in efforts already under way.* Find out what your church has planned. If nothing is scheduled, perhaps you should consult your pastor about starting something or getting involved with efforts that are under way in your community.

2) *Attend fundraising events.* Especially for privately run shelters, there is always a need for money. Attend a sponsored pancake breakfast or any other fundraising extravaganza.

3) *Be prepared.* When homeless people ask you for money, be prepared by having an energy bar on hand instead, as well as information about how to get to the closest shelter or soup kitchen.

4) *Continue the trend.* Many shelters are overwhelmed with volunteers around the holiday season, but during the rest of the year help is scarce. See where you can fit volunteering or donations into your calendar during months when the "Christmas spirit" doesn't typically abound.

A long road home

Eventually, Mattingly gave up drinking and admitted himself to a VA hospital. He was placed in a halfway house, where he dedicated his life to Christ. Matching funding through his veteran's benefits allowed Mattingly to earn a degree in computer science from Minneapolis Technical College, and he began working as a contractor for various companies.

In 1999, 12 years after he was living on the streets, Mattingly moved to Iowa and started his own computer consulting company. It was incorporated in 2002.

Mattingly discovered hard work and community compassion played

large roles in his rebuilt life. But he points to another overriding factor in the blessings he enjoys today — a factor that will continue to touch his life regardless of the money he has.

"If you don't have trust in God, you don't have anything," he says. "Money has nothing to do with it. I believe I could be homeless again and it wouldn't rock my faith. The greatest gift God has ever given me was allowing me to be homeless. We learn so much more from pain and suffering than through any other way." ■

**Name has been changed.*

Jocelyn Green is a freelance writer living in Cedar Falls, Iowa.

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