

## **Out of Sight - Rural Homelessness**

Perhaps you've seen the makeshift shelters: a camper that appears to be used for everyday living, a tent that is occupied but has long passed its use for shelter, a vehicle packed full of "stuff." The image of an individual sleeping on the street, clearly visible to those passing by, is much less frequent in rural America. Literal homelessness, or the condition of living on the street or in a shelter, does exist in rural America, but due to the geographic vastness of most of these areas you don't necessarily see the homeless individual. Individuals experiencing homelessness in rural areas typically include doubling or tripling up with friends or relatives. Although not homeless in the literal sense, these are individuals that do not have access to safe, secure homes of their own. Proud people with a long tradition of self-reliance, the rural homeless are reluctant to seek help, are far from established support services, and hard to reach.

### **HEARTH Act**

Before the passage of the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing (HEARTH) Act of 2009, most rural homeless were not considered homeless by the federal government. The HEARTH Act expanded the federal government's definition of a homeless individual to include those at imminent risk of homelessness-including those doubled up and those living in extremely substandard conditions. The passage of the HEARTH Act set forward, for the first time in the federal definition of homelessness, criteria that better suited and described rural homeless populations.

### **Causes/Challenges**

Rural homelessness has many of the same root causes as its more visible counterpart urban homelessness: poverty, inadequate housing, domestic violence, mental illness. People living in rural areas are between 1.2 and 2.3 times more likely to be poor than people living in metropolitan areas, and poor rural communities have some of the highest rates of homelessness in the country. In addition to increased poverty rates, rural communities often have lower numbers of affordable housing units causing many individuals and families in need to live in overcrowded conditions and dilapidated structures. Rural households that rent a home are twice as likely to live in substandard housing as their urban counterparts.

Rural areas have fewer service providers, and people may have to travel long distances where service providers are available. Small, spread out populations make it more expensive to serve rural homeless people than those in areas with denser populations. Homeless assistance resources are usually targeted to areas with the largest and most visible populations, further challenging rural providers. There are fewer shelters in rural areas. Therefore, people experiencing homelessness are less likely to live on the street or in a shelter and more likely to live in a car or camper, or with relatives.

Since rural homeless people do not sleep outside, in emergency shelters, or in visible spaces, there may be a general perception that this problem does not exist in rural communities. This lack of awareness can lead to reluctance to address the problem adequately.

### **Mental Health**

When adults living with serious mental illness cannot get adequate treatment or services, they often end up on the street. According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), about one in four homeless persons struggle with severe mental illness. Lack of housing causes people with serious mental illnesses to cycle among hospitals, shelters, the streets or jails at very high costs.

Every three years Couleecap conducts a needs assessment of the four-county service area (Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon) to gather relevant information to help Couleecap design programs that address the issues of poverty and promote self-sufficiency for low-income families in the Coulee Region. The 2013 Couleecap Needs Assessment results show that 31.2 percent of survey respondents reported physical, mental, or emotional problems limited the adults in their household from finding work.

Getting treatment for mental illness/depression was a high/very high need for 24 percent of the survey respondents. Dealing with increased stress and having adequate healthcare was a moderate to high need for more than 50 percent of survey respondents' households. Additionally, based on the definition of homelessness, about one out of ten (10.5%) of survey respondents could be considered homeless in the four county region.

**Point-In-Time Survey**

People who are homeless are a hidden population. They may be living with friends, in cars, in tents, under bridges, or in jail. Many have jobs, but social problems or health costs drain them of the finances they need to maintain housing. We hear about them when they get into trouble.

Twice a year a Point-In-Time survey is conducted to collect an unduplicated count of people experiencing homelessness during a designated one-night period. This count includes persons that are homeless and living in emergency shelters, transitional housing, safe havens for the homeless, domestic violence shelters, or who are unsheltered living on the street or any other place not meant for human habitation. The survey conducted on January 30, 2013 with various service agencies in Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties included the following information:

Populations Served – Number of persons served on January 30, 2013 (Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties) with emergency shelter, motel vouchers, or in transitional housing in the following categories:

Category	Number of Persons (Crawford, La Crosse, Monroe, and Vernon counties)
Chronically Homeless	47
Severely Mentally Ill	71
Chronic Substance Abuse	54
Female Veterans	4
Male Veterans	77
Persons with HIV/AIDS	1
Victims of Domestic Violence	56
Unaccompanied Youth (under 18)	2

**Housing Costs**

Housing costs generally consume the largest chunk of household income. **The Housing Wage in Wisconsin is \$14.67.** In Wisconsin, the Fair Market Rent (FMR) for a two-bedroom apartment is \$763. In order to afford this level of rent and utilities, without paying more than 30% of income on housing, a household must earn \$2,543 monthly or \$30,518 annually. Assuming a 40-hour work week, 52 weeks per year, this level of income translates into a Housing Wage of \$14.67.

Listed are the housing wages needed in our area for a two-bedroom apartment:

County	Housing Wage
Crawford	\$12.04
La Crosse (same for City)	\$13.44
Monroe	\$12.81
Vernon	\$12.04

In Wisconsin, a minimum wage worker earns an hourly wage of \$7.25. In order to afford the FMR for a two-bedroom apartment, a minimum wage earner must work 81 hours per week, 52 weeks per year. Or a household must include two minimum wage earners working 40 hours per week year-round in order to make the two-bedroom FMR affordable.

The estimated mean (average) wage for a renter in Wisconsin is \$11.22. In order to afford the FMR for a two-bedroom apartment at this wage, a renter must work 52 hours per week, 52 weeks per year. Or working 40 hours per week year-round, a household must include 1.3 workers earning the mean renter wage in order to make the two-bedroom FMR affordable. The 2013 Fair Market Rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Crawford and Vernon County is \$626; La Crosse County is \$699; Monroe County is \$666. When paying more than 30 percent of their income for housing, a family may not have enough money for food, transportation, health care, dependent care (child or elder), taxes, and other household needs.

## Homeless Children

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act ensures that homeless children and unaccompanied youth have access to public school educational programs and services that allow them to meet the same challenging state academic standards to which all students are held. This chart shows the number of students identified as homeless as reported by each school district for the 2010-2011 school year, with 3 year totals/averages as of 2/24/2012:

District Name	2010-2011	2009-2010	2008-2009	3 Year Total	3 Year Average
Bangor	4	1	0	5	2
Cashton	2	8	3	13	4
Hillsboro	0	0	0	0	0
Holmen	10	7	0	17	6
Kickapoo Area	0	2	2	4	1
La Crosse	174	121	166	461	154
La Farge	1	1	0	2	1
North Crawford	0	1	1	2	1
Norwalk-Ontario-Wilton	0	0	6	6	2
Onalaska	11	6	2	19	6
Prairie du Chien Area	21	28	17	66	22
Seneca	2	4	1	7	2
Sparta Area	71	74	45	190	63
Tomah Area	107	97	92	296	99
Viroqua Area	17	7	20	44	15
Wauzeka-Steuben	2	0	2	4	1
West Salem	8	12	14	34	11
Westby	0	4	0	4	1

The McKinney-Vento Act requires the designation of a local homeless education liaison in every school district. Local liaisons must have a clear understanding of the McKinney-Vento Act, be familiar with ways to work with their school districts and communities to identify homeless children and youth, review policies and practices to ensure the school success of homeless students, and create awareness of the needs and rights of homeless children and youth in the school district and the community.

***No one should experience homelessness. No one should be without a safe, stable place to call home.***  
*United States Interagency Council on Homelessness*

Couleecap, Inc. is a private non-profit 501(c)3 charitable organization created in 1966. Our mission is to fight poverty and promote self-sufficiency, economic development, and social justice. We are *People Helping People*, and everyday our *actions* make a difference in the lives of people and families throughout the Coulee Region. We currently implement more than 50 contracts in the areas of housing, emergency assistance, child and family development, business development, employment, transportation, and health. Each year, Couleecap helps more than 38,000 people work towards self-sufficiency. Visit our website at [www.couleecap.org](http://www.couleecap.org) or like us on Facebook.

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### References:

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