

WHO ARE THE HOMELESS – FACT Vs MYTH (2005)

“Find a homeless person and look into their eyes. Admit to yourself that you are just damn lucky. Admit that someday it could be you. Until you can do that, your heart is not in it and your mind still needs a clue.”

Khristian, 29, Social Worker, Los Angeles

It is our responsibility to understand who the homeless really are and to dispel the tired old stereotypes concerning them.

Much of what we think we “know” just isn’t true.



MYTH: They want to be homeless.

FACT: Less than six percent of the homeless are that way by choice.

MYTH: They’re to blame for being homeless

FACT: Most homeless are victims. Some have suffered from child abuse or violence. Over half are children. Many have lost their jobs. All have lost their homes.

MYTH: They don’t work.

FACT: One in three homeless are employed. At minimum wage, a person must work 88 hours per week to afford the average two-bedroom apartment in today’s Houston market.

MYTH: They are all mentally ill.

FACT: About 35% of the chronic homeless are mentally disturbed. This is only a small percentage of the total homeless population in Houston.

MYTH: They are all heavy drug users.

FACT: Some homeless are drug abusers; research suggests one in four. In Houston’s mentally ill homeless, it is estimated that 50% are substance abusers.

MYTH: They are all dangerous.

FACT: It is rare that an encounter with the homeless results in confrontation. If anything, they are the victims of crimes, not the perpetrators.

MYTH: Homeless panhandlers own condos in Florida.

FACT: People aren’t that generous, the average panhandler makes between \$2.00 and \$5.00 for every hour he or she panhandles.

MYTH: The homeless are all old men with wine bottles.

FACT: About 50% of Houston’s homeless are women and children. One-third of them are U.S. Veterans, both men and women. The major causes of homelessness are domestic abuse, high rents, high cost of childcare, low education levels and substance abuse.

MYTH: The homeless could all go to shelters if they wanted to.

FACT: Houston’s emergency shelters are 96% full on any given night. Some downtown shelters are full to overflowing every night. During inclement weather, gyms and other spaces are pressed into service but **shelters could only offer housing to just half of Houston’s estimated 10,000 homeless on a regular basis.**

Homelessness is a temporary circumstance not a permanent condition. Studies suggest that the average period spent homeless is about 3 months. Most of the “new” homeless do not know how or where to seek help. Some end up on street corners holding cardboard signs