

# Malnutrition Among the Homeless

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Homelessness, with its intertwined challenges of low income and lack of facilities for cooking and storing food, exacerbates the problem of malnutrition among low-income individuals and families. A 2007 study found that low-income households received insufficient vitamins and minerals from their diets, and were more likely to eat processed and fast-foods. The homeless face similar problems, in addition to some problems that are unique to homelessness.

Data on the eating habits of the homeless, especially in the United States, is relatively hard to come by, but the data we do have is not promising. Research from the U.K., for example, has found that the diets of the homeless were seriously lacking in nutrition. Fast-food consumption was also highly prevalent because of its low cost and the lack of preparation needed. A study of adult men and women in Miami found a high prevalence of “wasting malnutrition,” particularly among men, where muscle weight is lost because of insufficient food intake. Overall, the data indicates the homeless individuals are significantly more likely than the non-homeless to be malnourished: they eat fewer meals a day, go more days without food, and eat food lacking in basic nutrition more often.

Malnutrition among homeless youth is also prevalent. A Bangladeshi study of homeless children found that nearly two-thirds were malnourished; a 2008 American study corroborated those results, ultimately concluding that 165,000 homeless and runaway youth had experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days in the U.S. In adolescents and young children food insecurity and malnutrition can lead to lifelong growth stunting.

A lack of food preparation facilities makes it difficult for homeless individuals to store and prepare healthy food. They often do not have access to refrigerators to store frozen or cold food, meaning that any food will spoil quickly. They also lack access to food preparation devices such as stoves, microwaves and ovens, meaning that all food must be premade. These two factors make it extremely hard for the homeless to prepare their own food, making fast-food often the only available and affordable option.

Shelters can find ways to supplement the diets of the homeless in their neighborhood: protein and vitamins and minerals are especially key to making up the shortcomings of the diets of the homeless. (For information on how to improve the nutritional content at one's shelter, see the sources below.) But further change is also required in order to solve this problem. For example, affordable healthy options and communal kitchens would help homeless gain access to better options.

#### References:

A guide for shelters can be found at: Kourgialis, Wendel, Darby, R Grant, L Seim & I Redlener (2001), "Improving the nutrition status of homeless children: Guidelines for homeless family shelters."

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