

No Place to Call Home

Why Are More Older Americans Sleeping in Their Cars?

By Carole Fleck - October 1, 2008 - From the AARP Bulletin print edition

Behind a security gate in the desolate parking lot of a historic church in Santa Barbara, Calif., the grandmother settles in for the night in her Jeep Grand Cherokee. She reads a book, says her prayers and tucks a coat under her head before drifting off to sleep in the back seat.

No one knows she is homeless—not her coworkers at the coffee shop where she earns \$8 an hour nor her colleagues at the real estate firm where she spends time each week trying to rebuild a business.



—Photo by Jose Mandojana

"I figured I'd always have money," says the woman, 55, who preferred to remain anonymous and recently owned two homes worth nearly \$2 million. "I never dreamed this would happen."

Unable to sell her homes or shoulder the \$10,000-a-month mortgage payments, she declared bankruptcy in 2005. A year later, she lost both properties, becoming an early statistic in America's foreclosure crisis.

Today she epitomizes the changing face of homelessness as a small but growing number of lower- and middle-income Americans—people who never expected to become homeless—are driven out of their homes and onto the street by the nation's economic turmoil and the record foreclosure rate.

Many of the homeless are over 50. Nan Roman, president of the National Alliance to End Homelessness in Washington, says, "More people are becoming homeless when they're older, which is new. The programs that inoculated older people against homelessness are not keeping up."

A national problem

An estimated 1.6 million people were homeless in America between October 2007 and October 2008. And they are turning up in some unlikely locales. In Kansas' suburban Johnson County, where residents have the highest median income in the state, a shelter run by the Salvation Army is operating at full capacity and has a waiting list for the first time, says spokeswoman Amanda Waters. In parts of central and south Florida, including Tampa, low- and middle-income workers

are increasingly occupying shelters. The same is true in Cleveland, where emergency shelters are housing more people from higher-income exurbs like Brecksville and North Royalton.

Ironically, the thousands of homes and commercial properties lost to foreclosure and abandoned in Cleveland are serving a new purpose—providing shelter for many of the homeless who are trying to stay off the streets, says Brian Davis, executive director of the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless.

In Los Angeles, hundreds of people are living in their cars because shelters can accommodate only about a third of the city's estimated 73,000 homeless population, the largest in the nation, says Ruth Schwartz of Shelter Partnership, a local advocacy group. "There are many places you can park a vehicle for long periods of time without being noticed," she says.

Some 4,000 people age 62 or older in the region are homeless, says Schwartz. Even though nearly two-thirds have a mean monthly income of \$773, mainly from Social Security, many can't make ends meet, since local housing is so expensive.

Dozens of cities have responded to the crisis by making it increasingly difficult, if not illegal, to live on the streets. No-camping and no-sleeping ordinances are pervasive in many municipalities, including Atlantic City, N.J.; Albuquerque, N.M.; Olympia, Wash.; Fresno and Ontario, Calif.; and Miami and Sarasota, Fla. Panhandling has been outlawed or restricted in Lawrence, Kan.; Atlanta; Pittsburgh, Pa.; Akron, Ohio; and Lexington, Ky.



David Robbie, 57, a Vietnam veteran and father of three, has been sleeping in a Santa Barbara parking lot for more than a year. It's better than being on the street, he says.

—Photo by Jose Mandojana

Santa Cruz, Calif., once known for its anything-goes lifestyle, has implemented some of the nation's harshest laws, says attorney Kate Wells. A "blanket ban," punishable by fines, makes it unlawful for people living outside to cover themselves with a blanket from 11 p.m. to 8 a.m. Sleeping in cars is illegal during those hours. So is lingering in covered parking lots, where many people seek shelter during bad weather.

"Almost every city in the United States has tried to create new ways to make it illegal to be homeless," says Davis of the Northeast Ohio Coalition for the Homeless. "Mayors and legislators think you can legislate this out of existence."

The Santa Barbara solution

In Santa Barbara, Calif., an ultra-affluent oceanfront city surrounded by mountains, a novel approach is being used to accommodate recently homeless people who are among the more fortunate—they work and can afford cars, gas and insurance and often retain gym memberships for a place to shower.

Every evening, a dozen private and municipal parking lots throughout the city are transformed into relatively safe outdoor lodging for 55 of the estimated 300 homeless people who sleep in their vehicles. Two social workers check the lots each night as part of a safe parking project, run by the local New Beginnings Counseling Center with funding from the city.

For three months, Barbara Harvey, 66, slept in the lot reserved for women only. Propped up by pillows and blankets, Harvey and her two hefty golden retrievers squeezed into the back of her Honda SUV. In August, a friend found her a place in San Luis Obispo, 100 miles away.

A mother of three, Harvey became homeless after she lost her job as a notary and couldn't afford her \$2,150-a-month rent, even with Social Security and a part-time job. But she didn't want to leave. She was familiar with the city and its resources—so she wound up in the parking lot. "Just having a place to park added stability," says Harvey. "The dogs were familiar with the area and they didn't go running off. I felt safe."

Among her "neighbors" were a 54-year-old woman who shared her compact car with three cats, and a 79-year-old Texan who spoke fondly of her boarding school days.

Gary Linker, executive director of New Beginnings, which modeled the parking program after one in Eugene, Ore., says the high cost of housing in places like Santa Barbara has pushed people into unexpected living situations.

"Communities are recognizing the viability of people living in their vehicles," he says. "Each may not like it, but when you look at the severe limitations of affordable housing, you've got to accept this as an option for people."

Harvey, like the grandmother in her Jeep, didn't immediately end up sleeping in her car. Each stayed with relatives, friends and in motels before they ran out of choices.

Nancy Kapp, 50, one of the social workers who checked in on Harvey, was homeless herself years ago when she was raising her daughter.

"Santa Barbara is one of the richest places in the country, and it's amazing what's happening here," says Kapp, shaking her head.

"Poverty has been going on for so long and people ignored it, but now it's hitting the middle class, and people are paying attention. We should've been trying to find solutions years ago."