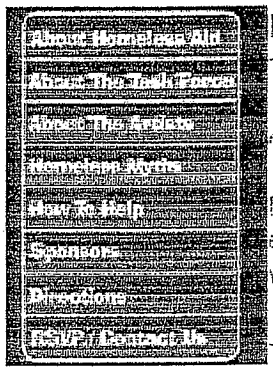
homeless
Saturday, August 17, 2002



Homeless Myths

Atlanta's homeless people are from somewhere else.

Most Atlantans - homeless or otherwise - were born somewhere else. Many of Atlanta's homeless people were not homeless when they arrived.

Homeless Myths based on copy courtesy of the San Diego Regional Task Force on the Homeless.

More services will attract more homeless.

This is part of the "magnet theory." In reality, however, people come here for the same reasons others do - economic opportunity. People don't travel across the country for a temporary stay at a shelter. Usually the prospect of a job is the primary reason for leaving a familiar environment and traveling to a new city.

The police should do something.

People who are homeless have lost their homes, not their civil rights. Being homeless is not a crime. The role of police is more often one of referring homeless persons to sources of help.

The government will take care of these people.

Government at all levels is hamstrung with limited tax revenue. More than ever, the private sector is being asked to help out.

Charitable groups will take care of the homeless.

The growth of homelessness has far outstripped the capacity of charitable groups. Homelessness is a societal problem that requires a partnership between private charities and the government, with active public support.

They should be put back in mental health institutions.

Many homeless people aren't considered to be in need of any mental health service. One-third are believed to be severely mentally ill. Some are also addicted to drugs and alcohol. The

majority of these can be helped through outpatient counseling and medication. Very few would qualify for costly institutionalization.

Their families should take care of them.

Families are often no longer available. In many cases, the breakup of the family or the need to flee from abuse is what led to homelessness. In other cases, families themselves are destitute.

Most homeless are living on welfare.

Only 20% to 25% receive General Relief, with an average payment of $249. GR, by the way, requires work assignments and active job searching. It is not a "free ride," and it must be paid back at a later time.

Homeless people with drug and alcohol abuse problems don't want to change.

Recovery from substance abuse is a long and difficult process for most people. People who are attempting to recover, however, face particularly formidable challenges if they are homeless. Outpatient and residential treatment programs are difficult to find without resources.

It's their own choosing.

The overwhelming majority of homeless persons want to get off the street, and into a residence. Many people make bad choices at some time in their lives. Among those on the economic margin, a bad choice can result in homelessness. The alienation and deprivations accompanying homelessness do not help people learn new and better choices. Sometimes, the effect is just the opposite.

They are out there from their own doing.

Some are. Most aren't. Those who are on the street because of bad decisions along the way shouldn't be made to stay there indefinitely. If someone has an accident from making a wrong turn, should they be left injured on the street?

We see who the homeless are.

An estimated 10 - 15 percent of the population is observed on the street. These are most often chronically homeless, and involved in substance abuse or mental illness. Many other homeless people, particularly women with children, go out of

mental illness
..031 (27.3%) have
a mental illness
domestic violence
411 women have
experienced domestic
violence (38.3%)
Also 11.5% of men have
experienced domestic
violence.
. approx 1,150 adults have
[illegible]

4. lack of income
16.8% have none
90% get less than
$10,000/year
22% of all of long
Beach live in
poverty
5. foster care
(9.1%) 344 have been
in foster care
6. lack of affordable
housing.

their way to be not noticed.

Most homeless break the law.

Serious crime is not attributed to the homeless population at any higher rate than is found in the general population. Those who have been on the streets for any length of time have usually received citations -- typically for illegal lodging, trespassing, jaywalking, drinking, and failure to appear. Homeless people are more likely to be victims of crime.

Panhandlers are homeless.

Even though they spend much time on the street, many panhandlers are often not homeless. Those people holding "Will Work for ..." signs are often deployed by organized solicitors, and are working in exchange for room and board.

What they need to do is get a job.

Most often, available jobs are at or near minimum wage, with not enough for housing. In order to look for any job, homeless persons need an address, a phone, a place to clean up, and transportation.

Homeless men should be working.

About 20 percent are working regularly. Some aren't able to work. Others want to work, but need assistance with the problems that led to their homelessness.

The homeless would be happy if we could get them all together somewhere (somewhere else).

Somehow, people are mistakenly viewed as being in a single group once they have become homeless. However, the only common denominator is their lack of a home. Creating a homeless ghetto is not the answer.

Homelessness can be taken care of once and for all.

As long as there are not enough jobs, affordable housing, and support services for the very poor, there will be people with no place to live.

Once a person is no longer homeless, his or her problems are solved.

Problems which caused or accompany someone's homelessness do not go away simply because living accommodations are found.

The rest of us have the right not to have to deal with the homeless all the time.

It is personally disturbing to see homeless people trying to survive on the streets. But blaming people who do not have the means to solve the problem is not useful. Helping to do something positive about homelessness is an effective way to deal with the discomfort of seeing these daily conditions.

There are shelters for these people.

There are shelters - but with a metro shelter capacity of less less than 5,300, the shelters can not accommodate the estimated 11,000 homeless people in Atlanta on an average night.