

The following are terms that relate directly to homelessness in the United States.

Affordable Housing- housing in which low income people can afford to pay without taking a toll on other financial obligations. Many times housing is made affordable through government assistance and rent control laws.

At-risk youth- a broad term which applies to youth who are in danger of being a difficult or dangerous situation. Examples include youth who are homeless, join a gang, or come from abusive homes. This term is very controversial among youth service providers because it generalizes the issues of youth.

Backpacker- homeless youth who only carry what they need their backpacks, hence the name. It also refers to the backpacker lifestyle, which embraces simple living, rejection of authority, camaraderie, and self education, among others.

Clothing closet- any place that gives away free clothing to individuals and families in need.

Couch surfing- when a person sleeps at the various homes of family and friends on different days. Couch surfing is usually done by homeless youth in major cities.

Food pantry- any place that distributes groceries to those who are in need.

Homelessness- a state of not having a permanent place where you know you can live for an indefinite amount of time.

Low barrier shelter- a shelter that has few requirements for clients to enter and stay. These shelters are different from others due to the fact that they do not require an intake process, or obligations like job training, to stay in them.

Panhandle- When a homeless individual asks people on the street for money. It's legal in most cities, but there have been restrictions placed on it recent years.

Permanent supportive housing- Permanent housing for formerly homeless individuals and families that also provides social services like counseling, medical care, drug rehabilitation services, and others.

“Soup kitchen”- any place that serves free warm meals to homeless individuals. The food is usually not soup. The term was popularized by actual government programs that served soup during the Great Depression.

Squatters- homeless individuals who sleep in abandoned homes. Sometimes groups of squatters may stay in an abandoned home permanently and form a community.

Survival sex- an act in which a homeless individual, who is usually a youth, has sex in exchange for food, clothing, money, and/or shelter. Not to be confused with prostitution or sex work which are done on a regular basis as a source of income. Youth will engage in survival sex as a last resort.

Train hopping- the process by which homeless travelers will literally “hop” onto moving trains as a means of transport from city to city. Train hoppers have a very unique culture and way of life.

Transitional housing- housing for formerly homeless individuals that prepares its residents to live on their own. This is done through services like job training, life skills, and others which are offering in the housing.

Unstably housed- someone who has a place to stay, but cannot stay there indefinitely. Examples include those who stay in hotels/motels, or those who stay at different friends and family’s homes on different days (couchsurfing).