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HOMELESSNESS AND LONG-TERM OCCUPANCY IN NATIONAL FORESTS AND GRASSLANDS*

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Abstract

Long-term occupancy by homeless individuals on national forest lands often results in undesirable outcomes. Management challenges associated with the homeless include maintaining adequate sanitation and public safety, impacts to biophysical resource, and social conflict with other forest visitors. Our interviews with agency officials and other experts helped identify characteristics and impacts of long-term homeless occupants. Informants described homeless they encounter as typically single males, small family groups, or “Rainbow” families, consistent with Southard’s typology (1997). Impacts of homeless campers include illegally clearing trees and shrubs, digging latrines or canals for water, and trampling sensitive riparian areas. Impacts on other users, large quantities of trash and illegally harvested fish and game are also common. Managing homeless occupancy on national forest lands remains a persistent challenge, yet there is currently little research on this subject. In order for the U.S. Forest Service, and other natural resource agencies, to better understand and manage this issue, additional research on the subject is necessary.

1.0 Introduction

Each public land management agency in the U.S. has its own set of unique laws, rules, and regulations concerning camping and maximum stay duration at a site. This study considers the U.S. Forest Service, responsible for managing 154 national forests and 20 grasslands in 44 states of the U.S. The 193 million acres managed by the U.S. Forest Service has been known to attract a diverse array of recreation visitors as well as what we refer to as “non-recreational campers,” those who reside temporarily in the forest for purposes other than standard recreation. Some of these non-recreational campers include individuals or groups that are temporarily or permanently homeless. Camping on national forest is allowed in developed campgrounds, many of which are fee-based sites, and dispersed areas, including wilderness. Each national forest has specific rules about the maximum amount of time one can occupy a particular forest site; these are designated by a special ‘order’ as per the Code of Federal Regulations (36CFR.261.50), under “occupancy and use.” In some national forests, stay limitations are not specified, but most forests indicate a maximum stay of 14 days at a site. In recent years, longer stay limits have been allowed by special forest order. At the conclusion of an allowable stay, campers have to move to another site. Rules for movement can be as little as some radial distance away from a site, up to leaving the forest entirely for a specified period of time, depending on the order. Stay limits also may have seasonal stipulations. Rules for camping are posted at the developed campgrounds and in visitor centers and ranger district offices.

A “stay violation” occurs when a camper exceeds the maximum time allowable at a site. U.S. Forest Service law enforcement officers (LEOs) can issue a citation for violating this regulation, which typically includes a fine of \$275. As with most regulations, LEOs have some discretion in how these rules are applied or enforced and how much time is allowed for compliance. Some national forests have special orders in place associated with the handling of stay violations, which governs the response of law enforcement officials. The degree and severity of management challenges associated with homeless vary across regions, but overall, homeless occupancy of national forest lands remains a difficult situation.

Long-term occupancy by homeless individuals on our national forests and grasslands results in persistent management challenges and resource concerns resulting from undesirable impacts on ecological and social resources. Management challenges associated with the homeless include maintaining adequate sanitation and public safety, impacts to biophysical resources from over-use, chemical exposure, or poaching, and dealing with vandalism and conflict with other forest visitors. These management

challenges may already be a substantial concern for district rangers and law enforcement personnel. For example, a homeless man was convicted of starting a 2006 wildfire in California’s Los Padres National Forest that cost more than \$78 million to suppress, injured 18 people, and destroyed 11 structures (Man Convicted, 2008).

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, today there are about 580,000 homeless in the U.S. (National Alliance to End Homelessness, 2015). 31 states saw a decrease in homelessness, while 20 states saw increases in overall homelessness, with the overall rate of homelessness dropping by almost 4% from 2012 to 2013 (Figure 1).

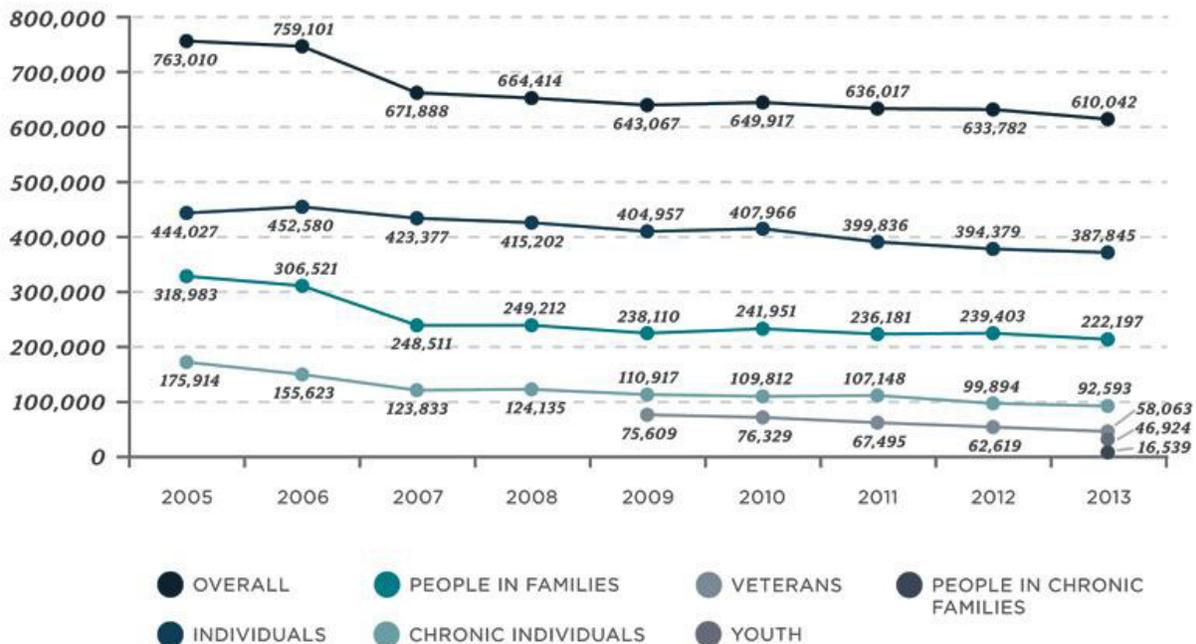


Figure 1. Homeless sub-population trends in the U.S., 2005- 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/the-state-of-homelessness-2014>

Information concerning homeless individuals or groups is difficult to obtain in urban locations, and even more so in remote locations, such as national forest lands. Our search for scientific research literature on the subject of homelessness on national forest, or any public lands, revealed precious little in the way of empirical work. The majority of published material on the subject of homeless residents on public lands appears in the news media. One notable exception is a single study by Southard (1997) in which, for over 18 months, she lived among, traveled with, and interviewed homeless individuals and groups living on national forest lands.

Based on her research of homeless campers on public lands, Southard (1997) developed a typology containing three categories. The first category, “voluntary nomadic” homeless campers, refers to those for whom “homeless” camping was a voluntary choice, or a preferred way of life. Voluntary nomadic campers conceived of their choice as the pursuit of an alternative lifestyle, one in which they have consciously rejected participation in the modern world in favor of a more deeply spiritual life that focuses on connection to the earth and their fellow travelers. Southard references the notion of “hippy tramps” in her description, further elaborating that voluntary nomadic campers considered themselves a tribe or flexible but cohesive agglomeration of individuals and families who traveled, lived off the land, bartered, published guidebooks, maintained blog sites, and participated in large, regular gatherings. A contemporary example includes the annual Rainbow Family of Living Light event. Voluntary nomadic campers seldom engage in paid labor, citing their rejection of “the system” as reason to maintain their lifestyle. These individuals had various amounts of personal possessions, may own a car or bus/RV, and families with children are common among their ranks. Rather than attend formal schools, children in voluntary nomadic groups are more commonly homeschooled by their parents. The level of education is often minimal, with many children unable to read or write. The voluntary nomadic campers have created a space for themselves in the margins of society, in which they travel in large, fluid groups, and feel “at home” wherever they are.

A second group of homeless are those Southard (1997) calls “economic refugees.” In contrast to voluntary nomads, members of this group were homeless due to circumstances, not by choice. Economic refugees were usually recently homeless and lived in a nearby town or city. This group includes individuals and families who were temporarily unemployed or who have been priced

out of the local housing market. Economic refugees may be isolated from family and friends and due to their tenuous economic status may have become burdensome to others. Southard found that economic refugees were often living with others (e.g., sleeping on the couch, using a guest room,) immediately before becoming homeless. Members of this group often had full or part time employment, though their income was insufficient to provide housing. This necessitates finding an encampment close to a town/city or on a major transportation corridor. Southard reported that economic refugees were often industrious and hardworking. They were frequently resistant to staying in homeless shelters out of fear and embarrassment, but would use public assistance. Families in this category commonly opted for living on public lands out of fear of losing custody of their children to social services due to the family being homeless. Their possessions typically were either stored or carried with them. Children of these families usually attended nearby schools, where in addition to education, they received basic medical care and meals. Members of this group were actively trying to get out of being homeless as soon as possible, but circumstances prevented their immediate return to a stable residential situation.

The third group Southard (1997) identified she calls "Separatists." Separatists, like voluntary nomads, lived a fairly stable lifestyle on public lands. Most commonly, members of this group were single, middle aged to older males living a solitary existence, though family groups do occur. It was typical for groups of two or three individuals to camp together in remote sites far from major roads or other transportation corridors. Separatists in Southard's study frequently had military backgrounds or were experienced campers and hunters. Veteran Separatists often received a modest military pension or disability benefits. Separatists typically preferred to stay away from people, but would venture into nearby towns for provisions, to cash public assistance checks, seek social services, or work temporarily. Separatists were frequently very wary of outsiders, particularly law enforcement and government officials, whom there may mistrust.

A more recent study by Bortoloff, Campi, Parcell, and Sbragia (2012) looked at the incidence of homelessness and long term camping on the Willamette National Forest in Oregon. Using Southard's (1997) work as a guide, Bortoloff et al. interviewed national forest staff, social service staff, law enforcement, and homeless individuals to gain a better understanding of the situation. Their results reflected the same categories of homeless campers consistent with Southard's typology. Bortoloff et al. found that, according to their informants, the homeless on the Willamette National Forest are mostly seasonal, and that lack of services in nearby towns often drives the homeless to nearby forests. This study found, as well, that many homeless are unwilling to stay in the shelters that are available because to do so would require them to part with children or pets. Bortoloff et al. found too, that many homeless are struggling with addiction and mental health problems.

Beyond a very small number of studies (Bortoloff, Campi, Parcell, & Sbragia, 2012; Southard 1997) empirical research on the incidence and impacts of homeless and other non-recreational campers on national forest lands is lacking. The purpose of this preliminary exploration of this issue is to help improve our understanding of the ecological and social impacts of non-recreational camping on national forest lands. Such information will inform forest managers and law enforcement officials who are currently experiencing incidences of homeless encampments in their area of jurisdiction. To collect our data, we carried out interviews with a small number of knowledgeable informants and conducted a rapid appraisal of interview outcomes. What follows is a brief description of our project and outcomes.

2.0 Methods

We used a rapid appraisal approach for this exploration of the incidence of homelessness on national forest lands to obtain some perspective on the impacts. Rapid appraisal is a less structured data collection method aimed at supplying needed information in a timely and cost-effective manner. The technique allows researchers to develop a preliminary qualitative understanding of a situation (Beebe, 1995). The rapid appraisal approach can employ any of the qualitative research techniques, such as document review (e.g., content analysis of records) or interviews, and often relies on a small number of samples, or data. The intention is to quickly gain a broad understanding of a situation, so that subsequent research has some foundation in a largely unexplored area and policy decisions can be made expeditiously.

Our application of a rapid appraisal approach relied on key informant interviews that were conducted with two USFS law enforcement officers, one USFS ranger, and one university researcher. Interviews were carried out either at the informant's place of employment, or in office space located at the researchers' university. Severe budget and time constraints necessitated a small number of interviews. The researchers contacted potential interview participants by email initially, and then through follow-up phone calls we made arrangements to carry out interviews. Interview questions were developed based upon review of available literature and prior research. Each informant was asked a series of questions about the type of homeless individuals they encounter, the frequency of encounters with homeless campers, the resource challenges associated with homeless encampment, the physical settings that attract homeless campers, and implications of homeless camping on the biophysical and social environment. We also sought to learn more about how managers and law enforcement interact with homeless forest visitors and the rules that govern these interactions. Interviews lasted approximately one hour, were carried out singly or by two researchers interviewing an informant in person, and were not recorded

3.0 Results

3.1 Impacts on Natural Features

In response to an open-ended question about the impacts of non-recreational campers on natural features, interview participants responded with a number of observations that were common across interviews. Participants frequently reported impacts to soil and vegetation. Homeless campers need to access water for drinking, bathing, and washing, and do so often through sensitive riparian areas causing substantial damage. Respondents indicated that damage to vegetation was very common, and usually occurred in the form of trampling or cutting to build shelters or concealment. Makeshift shelters, or “hooches,” are often constructed of both cut vegetation and discarded or stolen building materials, or other man-made materials that have been scavenged. Brush and trees are also cut down to clear a site, and for firewood used in (frequently illegal) fire pits.

Other common impacts mentioned by interviewees include excessive amounts of trash and litter around a site, and contamination of areas and nearby water bodies. Non-recreational campers often have large amounts of trash both strewn about a site or in large piles nearby. Spoiled food, commodity boxes, and large numbers of water containers are also common. A related substantial impact is pollution of nearby water sources such as streams, rivers, lakes, springs. Non-recreational campers use these for bathing, washing clothing and implements, and for disposal of human waste. Use of less damaging biodegradable soaps and cleaners in and around water sources is very unusual. Area contamination also occurs because homeless campers dump or spill automotive fluids directly onto the ground while carrying out repairs on their cars. A less common impact is illegal hunting, trapping, and fishing activities, where individuals are harvesting fish, game, or plants without a permit or out of season. One respondent told us that homeless campers do not observe hunting or fishing regulations or seasons. Any animal is fair game for consumption or other use.

3.2 Impacts on Other Forest Users

Homeless campers’ impacts on recreational forest visitors mostly consist of nuisance behaviors. According to our interviews, even in the absence of direct contact, many visitors will simply avoid an area if a homeless encampment is present. The sights, sounds, and odors associated with the presence of homeless forest dwellers can dissuade others from camping close by. Recreational visitors may be concerned for their wellbeing and safety, and the security of their possessions if there are homeless encampments in an area. Homeless non-recreational campers also have been observed panhandling and begging for food, cigarettes, liquor, or other items in public camping areas, popular trail-heads, or other developed recreation facilities and parking areas. According to interviewees, homeless panhandling behavior can be upsetting and objectionable to other forest visitors since many travel from cities partly with the intention of escaping such encounters that often occur in urban areas.

According to interviewees, minor nuisance behaviors are most common, but non-recreational campers also engage in certain criminal activities that impact other forest users. Non-recreational campers have illegally entered or vandalized vacation homes located on or near national forests lands. Usually, such break-ins appear to be motivated by the need to obtain short term shelter, or to acquire food or other items. Petty theft from recreational visitors is fairly common as well. Homeless residents on national forest lands were accused of syphoning gas from cars or taking possession of items left in camp sites while the campers are away. One interview participant indicated that children from presumed homeless families had taken items left in unattended campsites, especially toys or bikes. Non-recreational campers also reportedly have removed lumber and other building materials from USFS structures to construct their shelters or for use as firewood. According to interviews, this is a fairly common occurrence in areas where large numbers of homeless are camping.

Non-recreational campers seldom perpetrate more serious crimes against other forest users, though isolated incidences of murder, rape, and grand theft have been documented. According to interviewees, homeless and non-recreational campers are more often the victims of serious or violent crimes than recreational visitors. Assault, battery, domestic violence, rape, and murder have occurred within larger homeless encampments that may include multiple inhabitants or social groups where non-recreational campers drift in and out of the group. Domestic violence, assault, and battery were thought to occur in combination with alcohol or drug use among homeless campers, some of whom are suffering from addiction or other physical or psychological health conditions. Interviewees note that drug use is thought to be fairly common among homeless campers, though drug cultivation is exceedingly rare among non-recreational campers. Drug operations will hire individuals to stay with the operation for protection, but such individuals are not homeless, in the sense that once the drug production is complete, these individuals leave.

3.3 Impacts on Management

One of the principal impacts on managing national forest lands in the presence of non-recreational campers is the time required to respond to the challenges. One informant indicated that it takes an LEO an average of 30 minutes to handle an encounter with a homeless camper. This time can be doubled or tripled if an officer comes across a previously unknown site or individual and needs to conduct a thorough inspection and investigation of the site. The issue of response time is significant because LEOs are often individually responsible for patrolling tens of thousands of acres of national forest and ensuring both public safety and resource protection. Because non-recreational camper sites are typically very spread out or very remote, coverage challenges are

worsened. With one LEO patrolling thousands of acres of often rugged terrain, homeless campers may secret themselves successfully for long periods of time. Time spent investigating non-recreational campers takes LEOs away from other patrol and law enforcement responsibilities.

Cleaning up homeless encampments is another substantial management impact, according to our interviewees. Non-recreational campers may move on and take their possessions with them, but frequently they leave behind possessions in addition to trash and discarded items. According to interviewees, trash left behind can include cars, furniture, shelters, lean-tos and tarps, clothing, spoiled food, soiled diapers, books, and toxic pollutants that all must be removed. The cost of trash removal and site clean-up can be in the tens of thousands of dollars over an entire forest. If the camper moves to another U.S. Forest Service site, this clean-up may be repeated.

One respondent reported to us that he felt that USFS regulations managing homeless and other non-recreational campers were adequate, but challenges with personnel capacity made it difficult to respond to the extent that may be necessary, particularly given other law enforcement priorities or pressing issues. This respondent felt that in some cases there were not enough officers available to handle the problem, though felt that the policies and procedures in place were sufficient. Respondents also reported that cross agency communication was a major challenge. Federal resource agencies, state resource agencies, state troopers, and local law enforcement all maintain separate record systems and it is sometimes difficult to check information across agencies. For example, if a homeless individual has been camping on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, and then moves to USFS land, a USFS LEO is severely limited in her ability to investigate the homeless individual's interactions with BLM personnel or to review BLM data concerning the homeless camper. Such a lack of cross agency communication creates major challenges in tracking and investigation of homeless individuals or understanding the challenges in a systemic way.

4.0 Management Recommendations

It seems apparent that homelessness is a persistent social and economic challenge in the U.S. and addressing challenges associated with homeless habitation in urban, rural, and wildland settings is likely to remain a significant public policy challenge for some time. Homelessness has implications for a host of public agencies, including public land management agencies like the U.S. Forest Service, whose lands can serve as temporary home to many. However, natural resource agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, were not established to house homeless individuals or accommodate long term non-recreational camping. In some cases, resources to address the challenges created by long-term occupancy of U.S. Forest Service sites are scarce. Funds spent to mediate or mitigate social and environmental effects of homeless campers take away resources to provide public services, facilities, and infrastructure designated for other forest visitors and for protection of resources. If we accept that there is no permanent solution to homelessness in the U.S, including on national forest lands, in the near future, active management of the situation is one viable alternative. From our discussions with knowledgeable informants, we can offer some management suggestions.

One possible approach to improving management of non-recreational campers is to focus on developing a stewardship ethic among groups living in forest settings. By using basic education programs, in the form of handouts or posted instructions, for example, the U.S. Forest Service may be able to reduce impacts of homeless campers on the natural environment. Providing instructions and guidance at entries to camps, trails, old logging roads or other means of entry onto national forest lands makes the information available to non-recreational campers. Additionally, LEOs could distribute educational materials to non-recreational campers they encounter. LEOs or other U.S. Forest Service personnel who encounter homeless encampments could share some basic strategies for lower impact camping during their encounter. Information to be included could cover the need for maintaining healthy water bodies, through proper sanitation and disposal of liquid refuse, for example. Guides or other handouts might cover topics of hunting and fishing as well, to dissuade use of illegal fishing tools or hunting out of season. It is not clear at this point whether providing such guidance might be misconstrued by homeless individuals as approval or authorization to camp illegally. To counter such misapprehensions, guides could also include regulations on stay limits and other national forest regulations. In helping to educate non-recreational campers, many of whom are likely to remain on national forest lands for extended periods, the U.S. Forest Service could expect at least some reduction in impacts and perhaps fewer or less severe interventions for site clean-up.

A second suggestion is the establishment of fee-free sites that might help to consolidate homeless campers into a specific area. This idea would likely require regulatory modifications to stay limits to allow long-term temporary encampments under specific circumstances. Consolidation of homeless campers into one area will help U.S. Forest Service staff monitor behavior and address problems quickly. Instead of having to spend hours searching through often densely wooded areas, LEOs will know where such fee-free encampments are located, and can easily access them and monitor activities. Related to our first suggestion, education sessions conducted at such communal camp sites would reach a larger number of homeless campers simultaneously resulting in more efficient use of U.S. Forest Service personnel and resources. Partnerships with local homeless advocacy organizations and social service offices could develop other training sessions for homeless in these encampments, offering strategies and paths out of homelessness. There are clearly substantial challenges in managing such concentrations of homeless

campers, including law enforcement challenges dealing with petty crimes, substance abuse, and more serious crimes. One possible response would be to collaborate with social service agencies to help residents of these camps develop governing bodies within the community. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that small collections of homeless can become reasonably well-functioning communities (Bjornstad, 1993). Careful management and supervision would be important and clearly this approach would not attract all types of homeless (separatists for example, would be unlikely to congregate in such areas), but designating specific areas for homeless may be a reasonable response to a difficult problem.

A third suggestion is that homeless campers could be organized as a source of volunteer labor through structured programs similar to JobCorp, or Youth Conservation Corp, where training is provided to gain employment skills and build confidence. Homeless and other non-recreational campers could be tasked with clearing brush, site clean-up, riparian area restoration, road repair, or any number of other semi- or unskilled labor responsibilities in return for the opportunity to stay at designated USFS sites or other benefits. The U.S. Forest Service has a backlog of maintenance and is working under constrained budget conditions; a ready force of manual labor may present a common solution to at least a part of both parties' problems. Through this reciprocal relationship, many maintenance needs could be met, homeless campers could have a managed place to stay, and perhaps most importantly, many non-recreational campers may feel a sense of pride and contribution where they might not have felt that before. The opportunity for meaningful work could be among the first steps, along with social services help, to transitioning some individuals into a more stable residential environment.

5.0 Conclusion

Homelessness in the U.S. remains a substantial problem (Lee, Tyler, & Wright, 2010). Some areas of the country have experienced reductions, while others have seen increases for varying reasons including changes in economic conditions. Different groups are impacted disproportionately by the challenges of homelessness. Homelessness in the U.S. is a societal challenge we can anticipate to persist for some time. Many public agencies are now expected to provide support and services or to address challenges associated with homeless residents. Some land management agencies, like the U.S. Forest Service which manages national forests for public use, may not be equipped to manage an excess of visitors who are staying beyond the two-week maximum and who are using public lands as a temporary or permanent home. Non-recreational camping on national forest lands has been, and seemingly will remain, a substantial management challenge.

Homeless encampments on national forest lands can create considerable impacts on the natural and social environment. Environmental impacts can be substantial, with garbage accumulation, contaminated water supply, and damage to terrestrial or aquatic habitats occurring routinely. Social impacts of non-recreational campers include minor nuisance behaviors such as panhandling, and some types of criminal behavior that interfere with other users' enjoyment of their forest visit. These environmental and social impacts are creating expanding management challenges. Given that research looking at non-recreational camping on national forest lands is currently severely lacking, natural resource managers have little empirical data and analysis to help develop management strategies. Furthermore, there is an absence of management tools or decision models for addressing challenges faced by long-term occupancy of U.S. Forest Service sites. Public land management agencies are annually facing budget constraints and reduced personnel capacity, while the public use of national forests, including use by non-recreational campers, remains constant. The qualitative exploration of the issue of non-recreational camping on national forest lands described herein is intended only as a preliminary step to gaining a greater understanding of a complex problem. A web-based survey of USFS LEOs will follow this preliminary work, and is expected to shed more light on this issue.

Though the exploration herein discussed is brief and limited, it is our hope that it may promote further discussion and interest in the topic area. The U.S. Forest Service and other land management agencies are being asked to help manage a complex challenge, and through research, partnerships, and innovative approaches, we believe the challenges will be met successfully.

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Figures

SUBPOPULATION TRENDS, 2005-2013

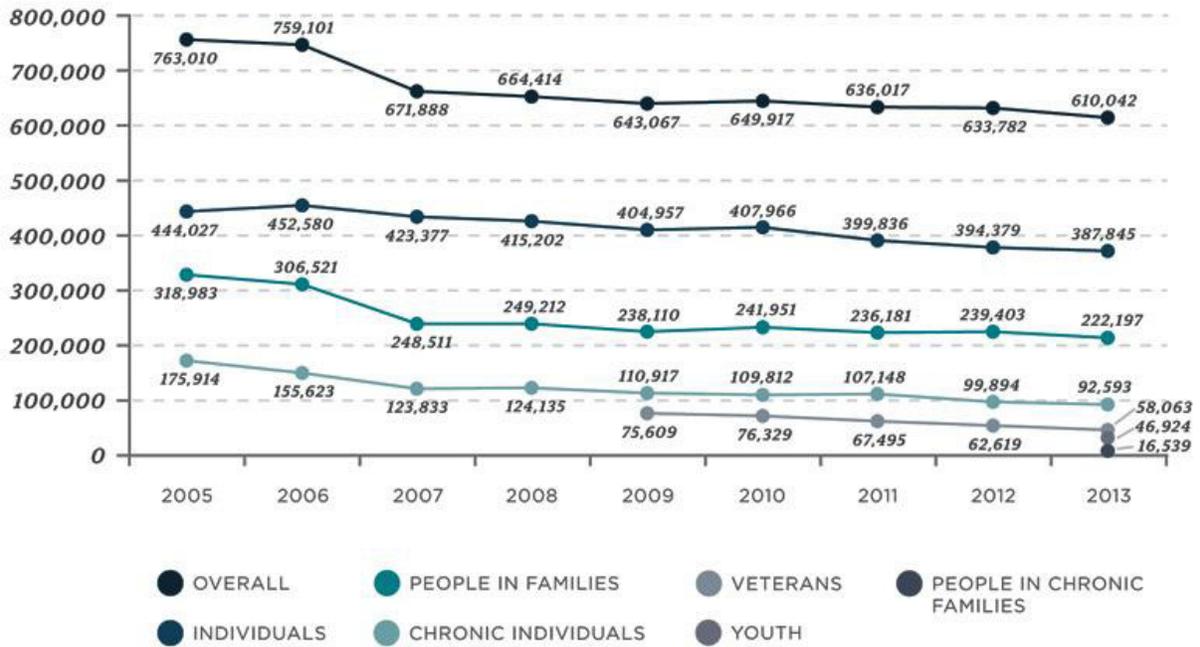


Figure 1. Homeless population trends in the U.S., 2005- 2013. Retrieved from <http://www.endhomelessness.org/library/entry/the-state-of-homelessness-2014>