

## The Social Health of Nevada

*Leading Indicators and Quality of Life in the Silver State*

# Housing Availability and Homelessness in Nevada

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The first edition of *Housing Availability and Homelessness in Nevada* was written in 2005 amid economic boom times and rapid population growth. At the publication of this revision, in 2011, Nevadans face crisis-level economic conditions profoundly affecting how we evaluate housing conditions in the Silver State. Hundreds of thousands of people have lost their homes and tens of thousands are jobless and without benefits, putting them at greater risk of homelessness (Associated Press, 2011, Silva, 2011, Sermons and Witte, 2011). Housing availability and homelessness are social concerns looming larger than six years ago.

In 2005, Nevada's economic boom was fueled by a seemingly strong global economy, an expanding local housing and commercial real estate market, and large casino construction projects in Southern Nevada. Home prices were

### Highlights

- In 2009, about 3% of the Clark County population (52,458 people) was homeless at some time during the year.
- 85% of mortgage holders in Las Vegas have negative equity in their homes.
- Housing permits in Southern Nevada have dropped from a peak of 39,012 permits in 2005 to a 30-year low of 5,734 in 2009.
- Some 40% of Nevadans are renters, ranking the state 47<sup>th</sup> in the nation.

### How to Cite this Report

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rising so dramatically that working-class people were being priced out of the real estate market (Borchard, 2006). But in 2008, a national and global recession hit Nevada hard, so hard that it has not yet recovered (Wargo, 2010, Wargo, 2011).

During this bust, Nevadans have waded through a steady stream of home foreclosures, evictions, and plummeting home values. They have also faced other downward social and economic currents which ultimately affect housing affordability and homelessness. These currents include an official unemployment rate of 14.5% (14.9% in Las Vegas), a decrease in median income, increased adult and child poverty, and reductions in government sponsored mental health and social services (Lake, 2010, Valley, 2010, Sermons and Witte, 2011, Vogel, 2010).

In late 2010, Nevada's Department of Training and Rehabilitation calculated that the state's real unemployment rate, including discouraged and underemployed workers, exceeded 22% (Waley, 2010). Only a few months later, tens of thousands of residents have exhausted their 99-week limit of state and federal unemployment benefits (Associate Press, 2010, Silva, 2011). Food stamp and Medicaid assistance are expected to increase at record rates, indicating that more Nevadans will be in economic peril this year (Vogel, 2010; Lake, 2010).

A problem even in the state's boom times, Nevada is likely again to have one of the highest percentages of homeless people in the US (Curtis, 2011). Policy suggestions and resources to improve housing availability and reduce homelessness are provided at the end of this report.

## Historical Background

Housing availability is a crucial issue for most citizens, and it serves as a basic quality of life indicator in a region. However, Nevada has an uneven and unequal history of providing access to land and housing. The Silver State's story begins with the Western expansion and the near genocide and displacement of indigenous peoples (Bowers, 2006). A series of federal laws, including the **Pre-emption Act** (1841), the **Homestead Act** (1862) and the **Desert Land Act** (1877) gave a select number of people the opportunity to develop property west of the Mississippi river (Nevada-History.org, 2011).

Rapid settlement of Northern Nevada began in the 1850s with the rise of silver and gold mining camps and mining towns. But in its first economic depression—between 1880 and 1900—the state lost one third of its population (Zhang, 1999) and thousands of people abandoned their homes. Reno and Carson City remain, but hundreds of ghost towns dot the landscape as a testament to resource speculation in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The permanent settlement of Las Vegas is little more than a century old. From 1909 to 1911, the San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad invested in housing for its middle-level employees at the desert way station (UNLV Digital Library, 2003).

At the onset of the Great Depression, thousands of people moved to Southern Nevada, anticipating work on the Boulder Dam and setting camp in “Ragtown.” Eventually, temporary workforce housing was provided by the US government. When the project ended, housing was demolished and many of the people left Nevada (PBS.org, 2000). This public water and electric project, however, enabled Southern Nevada to grow later.

New Deal housing programs in Nevada included the **Resettlement Administration**, which relocated unemployed urban dwellers to agricultural projects, the **Federal Housing Authority**, which provided low income people with housing, and the **Home Owner’s Loan Corporation** and **Fannie Mae** which created the foundation for home ownership in the US (Reid and James, 2004). In Northern Nevada, the Reno Housing Authority began providing affordable housing to low- to moderate income people.

During World War II, workforce housing was offered to those engaged in magnesium production in Henderson, Nevada. African Americans were restricted to racially segregated housing areas in West Las Vegas and Henderson’s Carver Park (Orleck, 2006). When the war ended, the magnesium plant closed and most of Henderson’s workers had moved away—another instance in the boom and bust cycle of Nevada.

After World War II, the **G.I. Bill of Rights** (1944) helped many families afford a home, but decent housing has not always been available for all citizens in search of the American dream (Katznelson, 2005). However, the **Housing Act of 1949** authorized more than 800,000 housing units with the goal of “a decent home and a suitable environment” for every family (Doak, 2008). Low-income housing was constructed in West Las Vegas as part of this federally funded program.

During the 1960s Great Society, civil rights laws and social welfare programs were established to reduce discrimination and give more people access to housing. The **Fair Housing Act** (1968) was a key law in reducing housing discrimination. Later, the **Equal Credit Opportunity Act** (1974) was passed to reduce mortgage discrimination.

More recently and more locally, the **Southern Nevada Land Management Act** (1998) opened up federal lands for rapid development, and paved the way for the real estate boom in the Las Vegas Valley.

As a quality of life issue in Nevada, homelessness also has a checkered past and present. Like other states in the US, America’s colonial era formed attitudes about poverty that continue today, including the primacy of personal responsibility and criminalization of homelessness. In colonial America, poverty was considered the result of individual moral failings. Poor people were occasionally provided with aid, but often faced involuntary placement in poor houses, orphanages, and jails (Ambrosino, Ambrosino, Haffernan, and Shuttlesworth, 2008, Pimpare, 2008).

Homelessness increased in the U.S. following the Civil War, as economies shifted from agriculture to industry. The rise of the “hobo” – dislocated transient workers –

corresponded with the period of Western expansion, as migrant men traveled the country by railroad for work and returned to “main stem” areas where cheap housing and services were centralized and a hobo culture flourished (Borchard 2010). Hobo counterculture came to be seen as a threat to family life and communities (DePastino, 2003). In 1873, Nevada legislators passed “An act concerning vagrancy and vagrants” which established jail sentences and physical labor for able-bodied people who were without work (Nevada, 1873).

Homelessness decreased during World War I, as working men were drafted for the war efforts, but homelessness rose during the Great Depression. Veteran’s assistance was implemented after World War II and the number of homeless people did not grow substantially after the war.

During the 1960s, SSI, SSDI and state welfare programs provided funds for housing and subsistence of disabled and impoverished people.

Homelessness rose by the 1980s after the Vietnam War had ended, the nation was deindustrializing, federal and state mental health programs were reduced, and single room only (**SRO**) units were systematically removed for urban renewal and gentrification (Burt, 1992, Jencks, 1994, National Coalition for the Homeless, 2007). Social welfare benefits no longer provided adequate funding for housing. Sociologist Herbert Gans (1995) described this long-term disinvestment effort as “the war against the poor.”

The characteristics of homeless people may also have changed by the 1980s. Researchers indicated that homeless people were more ethnically diverse, better educated, and with more women and whole families failing to find suitable housing than previously reported (Snow and Anderson, 1993). Homeless people were also made more visible in cities across the US (Pimpare, 2008).

By 1970, six local businessmen established a storefront for the Las Vegas Rescue Mission providing housing and food to homeless people (Las Vegas Rescue Mission, 2011). As Nevada’s homeless population grew, the City of Las Vegas established a “Homeless Corridor” which today is the site for several shelters and social services for thousands of homeless people.

The **U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development** (HUD) is a federal agency working to increase homeownership, assist in community development, and reduce housing discrimination. HUD’s programs provide housing assistance to the most vulnerable and marginalized citizens in the U.S., including elderly, disabled, low-income, and homeless people. Doak (2006) provides a summary of its programs. The **Nevada Housing Authority** is the state-level agency which administers housing policies. The **Southern Nevada Regional Housing Authority**, **Reno Housing Authority**, and **Nevada Rural Housing Authority** are local and regional agencies for addressing housing issues.

In 1987, the Federal government passed the **McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (later renamed McKinney-Vento)** which has provided billions of dollars for housing and homeless service programs. In 1990, Section 811 of the **Supportive Housing for Persons with Disabilities Program** provided permanent housing for disabled people who might otherwise have difficulty attaining it. Recently, the **Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing Program (HPRP)** provided millions of dollars to the State of Nevada through HUD. School Districts also receive Department of Education **Title I** money to serve homeless students (Doak, 2008).

Three federal agencies work together on issues related to housing and homelessness – the **U. S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD)**, the **Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)**, and the **Department of Veterans Affairs (VA)**.

Nongovernmental groups such as the **National Coalition to End Homelessness**, the **National Poverty Law Center**, and the **National Coalition for the Homeless** advocate with the poor and homeless for affordable housing and homeless prevention. The principles of **Housing First**, likewise, have changed the way advocacy groups and government planners reduce homelessness as they save costs from hospital emergency rooms and jails.

States and cities have also developed their own long-term plans to end homelessness. Although state efforts were short-lived, coordinated efforts between governmental and nongovernmental organizations continue in Northern and Southern Nevada, with the goal of ending homelessness.

## **Housing Availability in Nevada**

In the 2006 report, housing availability was examined as a factor of housing supply and demand, and housing and rental prices in relationship to income. Based on this analysis, researchers expressed concern that housing prices were getting out of reach to average Nevadans. Local housing availability has since been complicated by the fact that a significant number of people are unemployed or underemployed, and many others have lost their homes or are losing their homes to foreclosure (San Francisco Federal Reserve, 2011). In 2011, low income residents in Nevada are at greater risk of moving from poverty to homelessness (Sermon and Witte, 2011).

As the fastest growing state from 1990 to 2000, Nevada has had record population gains. The growth slowed down from 2000 to 2010. Due to the economic recession, Nevada's population has declined over the last two years (Waley, 2010). Nevada is made up of two large metropolitan areas (Las Vegas-Paradise and Reno-Sparks) where most of the population resides, as well as small towns in geographically large rural counties.

In Clark County, median home prices have declined from \$344,900 in April 2006 to \$121,700 in January 2011. Median prices in Reno peaked at \$398,875 in 2006 and have dropped to \$191,282 in January 2011. Existing homes for sale have been stable in Reno

with 5000-6000 listings, while the Las Vegas area has ranged from 24,000 to 28,000 listings in the last year (Housingtracker.net, 2011). A “shadow inventory,” however, may include thousands more homes kept off the market (Bay, 2010).

Homes have become more affordable by some measurements. According to the NAHB/Wells Fargo Housing Opportunity Index (National Association of Homebuilders, 2011), Las Vegas-Paradise Nevada ranks 42nd out of 226 metro areas in its housing opportunity index and Reno-Sparks ranks 63rd.

Quoting Local Market Monitor, however, CNN/Money reports that buying into the Las Vegas market is ‘frankly dangerous.’ This estimate is based on the depression-level unemployment and foreclosure rates in the valley (Christie, 2011). In January 2011, many buyers of Southern Nevada homes were purchasing with cash, suggesting continued real estate speculation (Wargo, 2011).

The Las Vegas area has been the hardest hit U.S. metropolitan area in terms of “effective home ownership rates.” The New York Federal Reserve found that 85% of all mortgage holders in Las Vegas hold negative equity in their homes (Haughwout, Peach, and Tracy, 2010). This phenomenon is popularly known as being “underwater.”

Housing permits in Southern Nevada have dropped precipitously, from a peak of 39,012 permits in 2005 to a 30-year low of 5,734 permits in 2009 (UNLV Center for Business and Economic Research, 2011).

A foreclosure is a legal process where a debt holder obtains a court order to take a homeowners property, often after the foreclosed party has not made payments. The process can take months and possibly more than a year before a homeowner is evicted (Michigan State Housing Development Authority, 2011). Nevada has had the highest percentage of foreclosures for 49 consecutive months (Wargo, 2011). In addition:

- 1 in 9 homes in Las Vegas was in some stage of foreclosure during 2010 (CNN.com, 2011) and 1 in 16 homes in the Reno area were in some stage of foreclosure (Brennan, 2011).
- Many parts of Southern Nevada and Washoe County remain vulnerable to foreclosure rates at 8% and above (San Francisco Federal Reserve, 2011).

Federal programs have attempted to reduce foreclosures and mitigate the damage to people losing their homes. The **Making Home Affordable** program attempted to reduce foreclosures through loan modifications. For those who could not stay in their homes, the **Home Affordable Foreclosure Alternative** (HAFA) intended to help people transition from unaffordable mortgage payments to more affordable housing (Garcia, 2011).

The **Nevada Foreclosure Mediation Program** was established through state legislation in 2009, and about 13,000 residents have entered the program. Home owners, however, have questioned its usefulness, accusing banks of acting in bad faith. Nevadans received no relief when a US District Court judge ruled in favor of Bank of America over foreclosed homeowners in a key class-action lawsuit (Green, 2011). Groups in other US cities have resisted evictions and have stood up for people losing their homes (Quigley, 2010) but this grassroots effort has not taken hold in Nevada.

Approximately 40% of all Nevadans are renters (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2010) ranking Nevada 47<sup>th</sup> of 50 states in its home ownership rate (Moody's Analytics, 2010). Renters have some limited rights under state law with recently added federal protections (Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, 2011). The **Helping Families Save Their Homes Act** includes a nationwide 90 day pre-eviction notice requirement for tenants in foreclosed properties (whitehouse.gov, 2009). In 2009, there were more than 20,000 summary evictions recorded in Las Vegas Justice Court (Chandler, 2010).

According to the National Coalition for Low income Housing (2010), Nevada ranks 40<sup>th</sup> of 52 areas in fair market rents. Information from this organization illustrates the difficulty low- to moderate-income people have in paying rent. In its report on Nevada:

- Fair Market Rent (FMR) for a two-bedroom apartment is \$1,005. In order to afford this level of rent and utilities, without paying more than 30% of income on housing, a household must earn \$40,190 annually.
- A minimum wage worker earns \$7.55 an hour. To afford the FMR for a two-bedroom apartment, a household must include 2.6 minimum wage earners working 40 hours per week year-round to make the two bedroom apartment affordable.
- The estimated mean (average) wage for a renter is \$14.35 an hour. In order to make a two-bedroom apartment affordable, a household must include 1.3 worker(s) earning the mean renter wage.
- The Fair Market Rent for a one-bedroom apartment is \$844. However, Monthly Supplemental Security Income (SSI) payments for an individual are \$674 in Nevada.

**The National Alliance to End Homelessness** ranks Nevada 49<sup>th</sup> of 50 states in “severe housing cost burden.” Over 80 percent of households below the federal poverty line in Nevada spend more than 50 percent of income on rent. Nevada also has been worsening in major risk factors for increasing homelessness, including high levels of

unemployment, foreclosure, lack of insurance, and doubling up (Sermons and Witte, 2011).

The **Nevada Housing Division (NHD)** reports the number of apartments for rent in the Las Vegas Valley, the Reno-Sparks area, and rural Nevada. The report includes numbers by apartment size, from SROs to 4-bedroom units. The NHD also reports vacancy rates. Apartment vacancy rates have increased from about 3% in 2006 to 11% in 2010 and some condo complexes have vacancy rates of about 40% (Nevada Housing Division, 2010).

HUD has a website where people may find federally subsidized affordable housing in their area known as **Section 8 housing** (HUD, 2011). People can find available Section 8 housing by city, zip code, and the number of bedrooms. According to the Nevada Housing Division (2010), subsidized housing rents are about 24% below nonsubsidized rents.

The **Southern Nevada Regional Housing Authority (SNRHA)** manages 24 public housing developments and administers 10,000 housing vouchers. About 7000 people live in public housing and another 38,000 people are helped with housing vouchers. The **Reno Housing Authority (RHA)** provides public housing and rental assistance in Reno and Sparks.

Despite the great need for affordable housing, Southern Nevada has not been issuing new Housing Choice Voucher applications since 2008 and the Reno Housing Authority has also stopped its waiting list (8Newsnow, 2010, Reno Housing Authority, 2011). In rural Nevada, more than 3500 applicants who are eligible for low-income rental assistance cannot get help because local agencies lack funding (Nevada Commission on Economic Development, 2010).

## **Homelessness in the US and Nevada**

The 2009 Annual Homeless Assessment to Congress (HUD 2010) and the Southern Nevada Homeless Census and Survey (Applied Research, 2009) provide a significant amount of data on homelessness in the US and Nevada. The Southern Nevada Regional Planning Commission's Help Hope Home (2010) implementation plan and Washoe County's (2006) collaboration with the cities of Reno and Sparks are significant sources for comprehensive and coordinated efforts to reduce homelessness in Nevada.

The National Coalition for the Homeless attributes the following structural causes for homelessness: poverty, fewer job opportunities, declines in public assistance, lack of affordable housing, lack of affordable health care, and foreclosures.

There is no single definition of homelessness or the number of people who are homeless. However, recent HUD counts have increased the lower range of estimates. HUD counts

the number of homeless people with a homeless census called a “**point-in-time count**” or “**PIT**”. The Homeless Census is conducted throughout the US and is required for federal funding of local programs. Homeless people are counted in emergency shelters, transitional housing, and on the street. A telephone survey is added to estimate numbers of hidden homeless. People who are “doubled up” are not counted, nor are people in jail on the night of the count. HUD estimates the number of people who are homeless during the course of the year based on the point-in-time count and survey information (HUD 2010, Applied Research, 2009).

Nationally, 643,067 homeless people were counted in 2009, according to the US national point-in-time count (HUD, 2010). Counts of 664,414 homeless people in 2008 and 671,888 in 2007 suggest possible reductions in US homelessness from 2007 to 2009. HUD (2010) reported that about 1.56 million people used transitional or emergency housing for at least one night in 2009. The National Coalition for the Homeless estimates 2.3-3.5 million people in the US experience homelessness over the course of a year.

Author Matthew O’Brien has received national and international attention for dramatically illustrating the lives of the **hidden homeless** in the tunnels of the Las Vegas Valley (Burke, 2009, Doane, 2010). According to O’Brien and others, hundreds of people live in these tunnels, which can fill up during heavy floods.

In its latest report, HUD’s point-in-time Nevada count was:

- 14,478 in 2009 (7792 sheltered, 6686 unsheltered).
- 12,526 in 2007

HUD also found that Nevada has the highest percentage of homeless people of any US state (0.55%), followed by Oregon and Hawaii (0.45%), California (0.36) and Washington (0.34).

In 2009, the point-in-time count for Southern Nevada was 13,338, a 17% increase from two years earlier, with an 82% increase in sheltered homeless. The number of chronic homeless in Southern Nevada also increased 49%, despite reductions in the number of homeless veterans and children. The homeless count was lower in the Reno-Sparks area in 2009 compared to 2007 and higher in rural areas.

Sheltered homeless in Las Vegas-Clark County area (HUD, 2010)

- 7,004 in 2009
- 3,844 in 2007

## Unsheltered in Las Vegas-Clark County

- 6,334 in 2009
- 7,573 in 2007

## Sheltered homeless in Reno-Sparks

- 645 in 2009
- 765 in 2007

## Unsheltered in Reno-Sparks

- 55 in 2009
- 98 in 2007

## Sheltered homeless in the Remainder of Nevada

- 143 in 2009
- 209 in 2007

## Unsheltered in Remainder of Nevada

- 297 in 2009
- 37 in 2007

Based on the 2009 point in time count, Applied Research estimated that about 3% of the Clark County population (52,458 people) was homeless at some time during the year.

The 2009 Clark County School District homeless student count found that 1,595 children were living in hotels, 3,297 were doubled up, 352 were in shelters, and 82 were in cars, RV's and parks (Applied Research, 2009).

Homelessness occurs throughout Clark County, not just in Las Vegas' Homeless Corridor. Significant pockets of homeless people are located in Henderson, North Las Vegas, and unincorporated areas of Clark County (Applied Research, 2009). In the 2009 census, more than 1400 unsheltered homeless people were counted in unincorporated Clark County. Unsheltered people live in many places, from garages and cars to parks, encampments, and abandoned buildings. Thousands of sheltered homeless have relied on Clark County Social Services rental assistance funds which have been cut.

Of the respondents homeless people surveyed, 69% were living alone, 5% were living with a partner, and about 5% were living with children.

- Age: Most of the homeless were between 18 and 65.
- Gender: Predominantly male (74%).
- Race/Ethnicity: 51% white, 31% black, 9% Latino.
- Education: 45% of respondents completed their high school diploma or GED, as their highest level of education. 5% had a Bachelor's degree or higher.
- Mental Health: Respondents frequently reported depression (43%), but were less likely to report being mentally ill (22%). 14% reported having PTSD. Most people with PTSD were not receiving treatment.
- Veteran Status: 18% reported being veterans, a drop from 25% in 2007.
- 27% reported being in jail or prison at least one day in the last year.
- 9% indicated they were currently experiencing domestic violence.
- Profiles of homeless subpopulations are described in more detail in the report (Applied Research, 2009).

When asked for the top three causes for their homelessness, respondents attributed the following:

- Lost Job 66.5%
- Alcohol/Drug abuse 27.2%
- Domestic Abuse 12.2%
- Gambling 11.9%
- Incarceration 11.8%

When asked what their barriers were to permanent housing, respondents answered:

- No job/income 68%
- Can't afford rent 49%
- No transportation 25%
- No money for moving costs 24%
- Bad credit 14%

According to the National Coalition for the Homeless, there are at least five groups vulnerable to homelessness: veterans, the mentally ill, people aging out of foster care, people leaving jail or prison, and people with no medical insurance (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2011).

Burt, Pearson, and Montgomery (2007) describe five effective strategies to prevent homelessness: housing subsidies, supportive services with permanent housing, mediation in housing courts, cash assistance for rent or mortgages in arrears, and rapid exit from shelter.

The cost of not housing and not treating homeless people can be expensive. The **Southern Nevada Regional Planning Commission** (SNRPC) estimates that

- One night in jail costs \$106 per arrest. It would not be unusual for four arrests and bookings to occur per year at a cost of \$424.
- Emergency room visits cost an average of \$3,722. Homeless individuals average two visits per year at \$7,444 per homeless person.
- An average transport by ambulance costs \$214.15. The average hospital stay is three days at an average cost of \$4,440. Those who only access healthcare through the emergency room do not receive follow-up care or services, making them more likely to return to the hospital.

The two current models to reduce homelessness are the **Continuum of Care** approach and **Housing First**. The continuum of care model assumes people must be sober and compliant to be ready for permanent housing. Although treatment is important in the Housing First Model, treatment and housing are considered separate domains (Tsemberis and Elfenbein 1999; Tsemberis and Eisenberg 2000; Tsemberis, Gulcur and Nakae 2004). Recent research indicates that the Housing First Model saves money that would be spent on the external costs of homelessness (Larimer, et al. 2009).

The State of Nevada and its municipalities have received Homeless Prevention and Rapid Rehousing (HPRP) federal funds, including \$5.8 million to keep 28 homeless programs operating in 2011 (HUD, 2011, Nevada Housing Division).

Washoe County (2006) had several programs, including **Homeless Court**, **Alternative Policing**, and the **Inmate Assistance Program**. Clark County has implemented a **Homeless Management Information System**, and has built permanent supportive housing using a **Housing First** model (Pratt, 2008). Unfortunately, there is little data showing the degree to which the local programs have worked to reduce homelessness or cut municipal costs. Public health efforts, at least anecdotally, show that providing comprehensive support to chronically sick poor people can save significant sums (Guwande, 2011).

Less is known about homelessness and housing affordability for poor people in rural Nevada. It appears that most of the documented rural homeless are located in Carson County, but many more may be hidden. Rural Nevada's **Continuum of Care** program includes "19 emergency shelters, 7 transitional housing providers, and 12 permanent and supportive housing providers (Nevada Commission on Economic Development, 2010)." Hundreds of poor people also live in motels throughout rural Nevada as long-term residents (Nevada Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).

## **Criminalizing Homelessness and Demographic Trends**

International law, under Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Rights, expressly states that housing is a right (United Nations, 2011). In the US, housing is not considered a basic right for all (Passaro, 1996).

Since the Reagan administration, federal funds to assist the poor have diminished. Individual cities have then increasingly taken on the burden of addressing local poverty and homelessness. To avoid attracting homeless and poor people, some destination cities such as Las Vegas and Reno seem to have reduced their investment in social services, instead reverting to police sweeps and ordinances that criminalize homeless living. The practice is a popular tactic to reduce visible homelessness by stigmatizing homeless people. Taking note of this phenomenon in many cities, the **National Poverty Law Center** has worked with the **National Coalition for the Homeless** in documenting cities that use particularly aggressive tactics designed to criminalize homeless people.

In 2004, the National Coalition for the Homeless issued a report ranking Las Vegas the “meanest city in America” for its heavy-handed approach to homelessness. The survey administrators weighed several factors in evaluating the cities, including: the presence of anti-homeless laws, the harshness of law enforcement efforts and the severity of penalties, the general attitude toward homeless people in the area, a consensus among local activists about the seriousness of the area problem, and a history of criminalization of homelessness by the city or pending criminal legislation. In 2005, Las Vegas was labeled the fourth meanest city in America (Borchard, 2006).

As a state heavily dependent on tourist revenue, Nevada spends millions of dollars to maintain its public image of youth, sex, glitter, and fortune. The underside of this endeavor has been the drive to criminalize homelessness. The effort to maintain this glossy façade is particularly strong in Southern Nevada where Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman once called for moving homeless people to a vacant prison near the California border (Borchard, 2005) and more recently to encampments in the desert.

Two recent legal cases are examples of how city officials in Las Vegas have attempted to control the use of public parks by homeless people. In early 2006, Las Vegas Marshals observed Las Vegas resident Gail Sacco distribute free food for weeks in Huntridge Circle Park, keeping careful track of the number of people she was serving. On February 19, 2006, Sacco was issued a citation for holding a gathering of more than twenty-five people in the park without a permit. *The Las Vegas Sun* reported that a Marshal banned her from returning to the park for six months. When the state ACLU representatives heard about these written and verbal charges, they became involved. In particular, they said that because Sacco had not yet been convicted of any crime, a ban from the park would be unconstitutional (Pratt 2006). The story received national media attention, including an article in the *New York Times* (Archibold, 2006). It was seen as a test case for how cities might regulate the use of public park space but in a way that might violate a core right of United States citizens, the freedom of assembly. Local

and national articles featured the perspective of those renting and owning property in the neighborhood, indicating that the presence of homeless people in the park was causing parents to avoid using the park with their children and encouraging drug use and petty theft in the area. Because the ban from the park was deemed unconstitutional, city officials addressed the problem of neighborhood complaints by simply closing the park. It remains closed today.

The second case involves police acting on a portion of an ordinance first passed unanimously by the Las Vegas City Council in August 2006 that made it illegal for anyone to sleep within 500 feet of feces in public space. The ordinance was revised on September 20 and the provision mentioned above was deleted. Despite that change, Las Vegas Police Department officers arrested three homeless men in Frank Wright Plaza, a downtown park, later that year for violating the deleted portion of the ordinance. Local homeless activists, along with local American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) became involved. Attorney E. Brent Bryson and the Las Vegas ACLU filed a lawsuit in federal court in December 2006 on behalf of the three men who had been arrested and had spent a night in jail. On March 29, 2007, the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported that a \$45,000 settlement had been reached on behalf of the men. Each plaintiff received \$10,000, while their lawyer Bryson received \$15,000 (Curtis, 2007).

Despite lost legal battles, the City and Las Vegas Metropolitan police swept away encampments in the “Homeless Corridor” near Las Vegas Boulevard and installed permanent metal barriers on sidewalks to prevent a return of squatters (Pratt, 2009). Today, Las Vegas is not listed in the top ten meanest cities, but police in the Las Vegas Valley and in Reno continue arresting homeless people and sweeping public areas to control the unsheltered population. In 2010, Mayor Oscar Goodman called for “donation stations,” a few refurbished parking meters near City Hall to cut down on panhandling near his office. As recently as November 2010, the City of Reno publicly announced sweeps of downtown transients by expanding its vagrancy ordinances (KOLO-TV, 2010).

A rise in violence against homeless people in Las Vegas Valley and in Reno has also been a problem. In 2007, two Reno teenagers beat three homeless men and killed another (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008). Las Vegas has been the site for “bum fights,” where homeless people have been physically abused for profit and media entertainment (Pimpare, 2008). Las Vegas has also experienced a series of beatings and murders which prompted hate crime legislation (Nevada, 2007). Michael Stoops, Executive Director of the National Coalition for the Homeless, stated that “social prejudices were ‘dehumanizing’ the homeless and condoning hostile treatment” while criminologist Brian Levin added that young people commit violence against street people for thrills and sport. In 2009, at least four homeless men were murdered in the Las Vegas Valley (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2010).

Tourist oriented cities such as Las Vegas and Reno will likely continue their policies of criminalizing homelessness. City administrators do not want their destination city to be perceived as attractive for homeless people to live—it is “good business” to keep such individuals away from tourist destinations (Borchard 2005, p. ix). Criminalization is

also thought to be cheaper than providing substantial help. Criminalizing homeless living practices additionally constructs homeless people as a problem population requiring control and management rather than as citizens with rights who need assistance to end their poverty. Innovative policies, such as alternative policing, homeless courts, and jail re-entry programs have been attempted to save costs in Washoe County (2006), but little has been documented about their use or results.

Researchers, agencies, and homeless advocates will learn more about homelessness demographic trends after results from the 2011 Southern Nevada Homeless Census and the 2012 HUD report on homelessness to Congress are published. Comparing the 2007 Southern Nevada Homeless Survey to the 2009 survey, researchers found fewer veterans and children on the street—but that there were more chronically homeless people and more homeless people in total. Learning how these data points have changed in 2011 may give policy makers a better idea whether particular programs and efforts may have worked for specific sub-populations.

### **What to Do If You Are Homeless, Near Homeless, or Wish to Help**

A list of community resources at the end of this section describes organizations where a person who is homeless or near homeless may receive help in different regions of the state.

If you want to be an ally of a homeless person or volunteer for an organization, start by educating yourself about homelessness and learn to listen and understand the diverse conditions and opinions of homeless people.

Homelessness can cause anyone to feel isolated, wary of others, and depressed. US culture, including mainstream media, tends to “blame the victim” for his, and somewhat less frequently, her homelessness. People without homes, especially in public view, are typically treated as a nuisance rather than a full-fledged person, and are sometimes targeted for violence.

Some homeless people believe that charity-based shelters and government agencies—and their bureaucracies—are not there to better their lives, that they are part of the system which that keeps poor people out of work and unable to find better housing (Swecker, 2009). People also have indicated to us that there is little oversight in shelter housing and programming. Publicly ask your local politicians what they are doing to reduce homelessness and rapidly rehouse those who have lost their homes or apartments.

In Las Vegas, some services are located in the “Homeless Corridor,” which is between A Street, Las Vegas Boulevard, Bonanza Road, and Owens Avenue near Downtown Las Vegas. But as our report notes, homelessness occurs throughout Nevada. Regardless of city or county, homeless people often say the best source of current information on services and hours of operation is the “street network” of other homeless people. Although recently homeless people may avoid associating with other homeless people, fellow street people are often best positioned to evaluate local resources and give practical advice (Borchard, 2005).

## Conclusion

Nevada has experienced many economic booms and busts and its current residents are still feeling the tremors of the latest crash. The Silver State has the highest foreclosure rate and highest homeless rate in the US. Home prices have dropped precipitously but apartment and home rents remain high, especially for the growing number of people with low incomes.

There is little evidence to suggest that Nevada's housing problems will improve in the near future. Although home prices have become affordable to some, evictions are commonplace, and judges have favored banks over people trying to stay in their homes. Groups in other US cities have resisted evictions and have stood up for people losing their homes but apparently this has not happened in Nevada.

State and federal funds are so limited that Nevada families who would be eligible for affordable housing and housing vouchers cannot even get on housing authority waiting lists. Funding from the US government has provided stop gap measures to help homelessness, but homeless numbers, particularly in southern Nevada, remain high. In Reno and Las Vegas, city administrations have responded to homelessness through "sweeps" and criminalizing homeless living practices, although here have been some coordinated social service efforts to ameliorate the problem.

Despite the devastation of the Nevada economy, the people of Nevada can do something to improve housing availability and reduce homelessness.

## Agenda for the Future

Existing programs to improve housing affordability and reduce homelessness should be reviewed and monitored. Programs that work effectively should be fully funded. Nevada should also look to other communities that have programs that do work.

**Revisions to the Nevada's Foreclosure Mediation Program** are recommended, so that banks are more strongly required to act in good faith with homeowners in foreclosure.

**Alternative policing, homeless courts, and inmate assistance** have been attempted in Washoe County to reduce the costs of emergency room visits, jails, and policing (Washoe County, 2006). In Southern Nevada, a Homeless Management Information System has also been used to coordinate services to homeless people. Clark County began its first **Housing First** program in 2007, a 66-unit facility (Pratt, 2008). Although Housing First programs have been deemed successful elsewhere (Tsemberis and Elfenbein 1999; Tsemberis and Eisenberg 2000; Tsemberis et al., 2004), more information is needed about the effectiveness of these measures in Nevada (Borchard 2011).

Community-based shelters and programs have faced little outside scrutiny and should be monitored in regard to best practices and standards of care. **Shelter monitoring** exists in at least one city—San Francisco (City and County of San Francisco, 2011). Monitoring the safety and effectiveness of these programs should be tied to future funding and licensing.

Involuntary commitment to community treatment is one strategy that can keep people out of jail and reduce the risk for homelessness. Nevada has been one of only six states that does not use this strategy. **Nevada Assembly Bill 94** would allow for involuntary community treatment. Programs such as New York State’s **Assisted Outpatient Treatment Law** have been shown to effectively reduce “hospitalization, homelessness, arrest, and incarceration among people with severe psychiatric disorders, while increasing adherence to treatment and overall quality of life (Treatment Advocacy, 2011).”

In Nevada, Section 8 funding only provides assistance to house one out of four homeless families. Providing housing vouchers to all homeless families in the state would cost \$38 million or less than 1 percent of Nevada’s state budget (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). The State of Nevada has spent a great deal more on prison construction.

In the long term, regional planners should begin to use **smart growth** principles to connect affordable housing to affordable public transportation, affordable medical care, and decent paying jobs. Nevada’s communities should also consider legislation such as the **Mount Laurel Laws** (New Jersey Digital Library, 2011), that allow low- and moderate income people to stay in communities as more expensive housing is developed for gentrification (Fair Share Housing Center, 2011).

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## Community Resources

**Nevada 211** is a joint effort of the State of Nevada, United Way of Southern Nevada, United Way of Northern Nevada and the Sierra, Crisis Call Center, and HELP of Southern Nevada to connect people to services in their communities. Operators help callers find basic human services, physical and mental health resources, support for seniors and persons with disabilities, and programs for children, youth, families. Excluding holidays, the line is open from 8 am to 12 pm Monday-Friday and 8 am-4 pm on weekends. You can also access Nevada 211 at <http://www.nevada211.org/> and <http://www.nevada211.org/sup.php?id=2>

The **Housing and Urban Development (HUD) website** (<http://www.hud.gov/local/nv>) has information on subsidized apartments, how to purchase HUD homes, and how to file housing discrimination complaints. A listing of most of the state's homeless shelters and soup kitchens (divided by what population the facilities serve) can also be found on their website, <http://www.hud.gov/local/nv/homeless/shelters.cfm>.

**The Reno Housing Authority** at 1525 East Ninth Street owns and manages 764 units of Public Housing (475 for families) in seven different locations in the City of Reno and Sparks under the Public Housing programs. Their telephone number is (775) 329-3630 and their website is at <http://www.renoha.org/>

**The Southern Nevada Regional Housing Authority** at 340 N. 11th St. manages 24 public housing developments and administers 10,000 Housing Choice Vouchers.

The main number is (702) 922-6800. Their directory is at <http://www.snvrha.org/departamental-phone-directory.htm>

**HELP of Southern Nevada** provides a range of assistance to individuals and families, including food, clothing, shelter, one-day bus passes, gasoline, rental assistance and utility assistance. They are located at 1640 E. Flamingo Road #100, Las Vegas, NV 89119. Tel. 702-369-4357, Office hours are Monday – Friday, 8:00 AM - 4:00 PM.

**Clark County Social Services** at 1600 Pinto Lane in Las Vegas has a limited number of rental assistance vouchers. Their telephone number is (702) 455-4270.

**Catholic Charities of Southern Nevada**, serving Clark, Esmeralda, Nye, Lincoln, and White Pines counties, provides a range of services for homeless men, women and children. These include transitional housing, emergency beds, employment services, residential work programs, St. Vincent's apartments and dining facility. For more information, visit their Administrative Office at 1501 Las Vegas Boulevard North Las Vegas, NV 89101 or call 702-385-2662. Their office hours are Monday – Friday, 8:00 AM - 4:30 PM.

Homeless Veterans needing medical assistance should contact the **Homeless Veterans Community Based Outreach Clinic A**. The clinic is located at 900 W. Owens Avenue, Las Vegas, NV 89106. Tel. 702-386-3140.

**The Salvation Army** at 35 W. Owens Avenue in Las Vegas participates in the PATH (Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness) program, which means that they receive funding for programs helping people with serious mental illness. A Safe Haven building was constructed in 1999 specifically to help those with serious mental illness. Tel. 702-642-0727.

**The Shade Tree** (1 W. Owens, North Las Vegas, NV) is a 24 hour emergency shelter for homeless women and women with children in crisis. Over 16,000 clients have been served since Shade Tree opened its doors in 1990. Tel. 702-385-0072, URL: <http://www.theshadetree.org>. The Shade Tree is a designated SAFE Place site for all community youth.

**Labor Dawgs/Father Flanagan LTD** is an organization identifying and removing the obstacles that block people in their recovery from homelessness. They visit about 600 homeless and poor people each week and assist with health cards, jobs, and steer people to housing and detox. Volunteers are welcome. Their website is at [http://www.labordawgs.com/Father\\_Flanagan\\_LTD.html](http://www.labordawgs.com/Father_Flanagan_LTD.html). Call Gail Sacco at (702) 355-2764 or e-mail her at [mom\\_in\\_las\\_vegas@yahoo.com](mailto:mom_in_las_vegas@yahoo.com).

**Food Not Bombs** is a grassroots mutual aid project based on recovering and sharing free food that would otherwise go to waste. They recover food from stores and restaurants that is still good to eat but can no longer be sold, and use it to make hot, fresh vegan meals. They oppose criminalization of poor and hungry people. The group

shares free meals on Sundays at Baker Park in Las Vegas. Their website is at <http://foodnotbombslasvegas.org>

**Nevada Partnership for Homeless Youth** provides rental assistance, shelter placement, job placement, free haircuts, laundry services, food vouchers, bus passes, and Nevada ID's, for homeless youth under the age of eighteen or have been in the Nevada foster care system. The Safe Place drop-in center is located at 4800 S. Maryland Parkway, Suite E in Las Vegas. The hours of operation are Monday - Saturday, 9:00am - 6:00pm. Their office number is (702) 383-1332, or Toll Free at (866)-U-ARE-SAFE (866-827-3723).

**Street Teens** is a non-profit, volunteer organization dedicated to helping homeless and at-risk teens, ages 12-21, in the Las Vegas Valley. It provides basic needs and case management for housing, employment, and job skills. Their telephone number is (702) 215-4171 and their 24 hour hotline is 1-877-LV-TEENS.

**Las Vegas Rescue Mission**, located at 480 West Bonanza Road, Las Vegas, NV 89106-3227, provides shelter. Their phone number is (702) 382-1766, and their web address is <http://www.vegasrescue.org/>.

**Reno-Sparks Gospel Mission** has a men's and women's shelter. For more information, visit them at 145 W. Third Street, Reno, NV 89513-5956, or call 702-323-0386.

**Friends in Service Helping (FISH)** assists poor and homeless people in Carson City (775-882-8448) and Elko (775) 738-3038.

Each of Nevada's counties has a county social service office. A list of services for poor and homeless rural Nevadans is available at [http://www.diversifynevada.com/images/cdbg/Consolidated\\_Plan\\_Final7-29-2010\\_s.pdf](http://www.diversifynevada.com/images/cdbg/Consolidated_Plan_Final7-29-2010_s.pdf) beginning on page 185.

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