

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/can-we-ignore-what-we-cant-see-invisible-homelessness-in-dc-and-beyond>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Its raining today in the District of Columbia. Its the kind of light, misty rain that persistently dusts coats and umbrellas. Its the kind of rain that brings with it a slight chill, but pleasant freshness into the air. For most of us, the rain ends when we make our way into homes, office buildings, restaurants, and various other places of shelter throughout the city. But for some of us, there is no relief the rain is a dampening reminder of reality.

This thought crosses my mind as I peer out from under the hood of my rain jacket and make eye contact with a shivering dog sitting on the lap of a melancholy woman. The dogs owner has her eyes focused on the ground, though I cannot tell if the look is of deep concentration or incredible distance. She sits motionless with all her belongings in a white pushcart to her left and a brown cardboard sign to her right. As my eyes move to read the sign, she looks up at me and, like so many other people, I avert my eyes and continue walking.

There are more than [11,500 homeless people](#) in the Washington Metropolitan area, 7,298 of which live in the District of Columbia. Of DCs homeless population, more than [5,000 people rely on emergency shelters and more than 500 of these individuals remain unsheltered](#). But these numbers count the homeless persons who are accounted for. Because we see them every day in some capacity, they are visible. What about those we dont see?

The District, and its surrounding metropolitan area, is home to an unmeasured number of people without traceable or stable sources of shelter. By securing makeshift or temporary residences, these individuals escape being a part of the indefinite statistics that attempt to capture data on the realities of homelessness in the city. They remain out of sight, finding short-term relief in the homes of friends, motel rooms, 24-hour businesses, and other havens that allow them to remain inconspicuous and anonymous.

Recently, Reagan National Airport, which had long been open 24 hours, began closing its doors from [11:30pm to 4:30am](#). For dozens of invisible homeless, many of whom worked during the day and would return to the airport at night, the airport served as [ade facto shelter](#). It was a space to more safely store belongings, catch some sleep, and find reprieve from adverse weather conditions. The closing of Reagan further displaced more than 100 homeless people, making it harder for [advocates](#) to identify people in need and connect them to resources and services that are essential for their survival.

At Veras Center on Victimization and Safety, our work is to bolster existing efforts to address the victimization of people with disabilities and Deaf peoplea community that inextricably includes people without consistent shelter. Indeed, those of us who work directly, or indirectly, with vulnerable populations recognize that the community of invisible homeless may include a wide range of people, including those seeking [asylum](#), recent [immigrants](#), people with [felony convictions](#), children, families, and people with [disabilities](#). Specifically, homeless persons with disabilities experience disproportionately high rates of victimization, including physical assault, intimate partner violence, rape and sexual assault, and hate crimes. Through projects like our [Accessing Safety Initiative](#) and measurement tools such as our [performance indicators](#), we seek to strengthen evidence-based prevention and intervention efforts for these survivors.

By continuing to aid the organizations that provide services for these too-often ignored and invisible communities, successively we see improvements in the quality and availability of resources for survivors with disabilities. As the field evolves, providers will be better equipped to serve survivors from all walks of life with varied needs. Consequently, as services expand, they may become far-reaching enough to affect the lives of those who were previously unreachable.

It is difficult to estimate the frequency of victimization for homeless populations, and even more complex to gauge the rates at which invisible homeless populations are likely to experience violence. Increasing visibility is essential to promoting safety and well-being for homeless people, especially those likely to be multiply marginalized. By taking the time to learn who these people are and to connect stories to faces, we, in our personal and professional capacities, can work together to raise awareness of their needs and help alleviate their struggles.

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