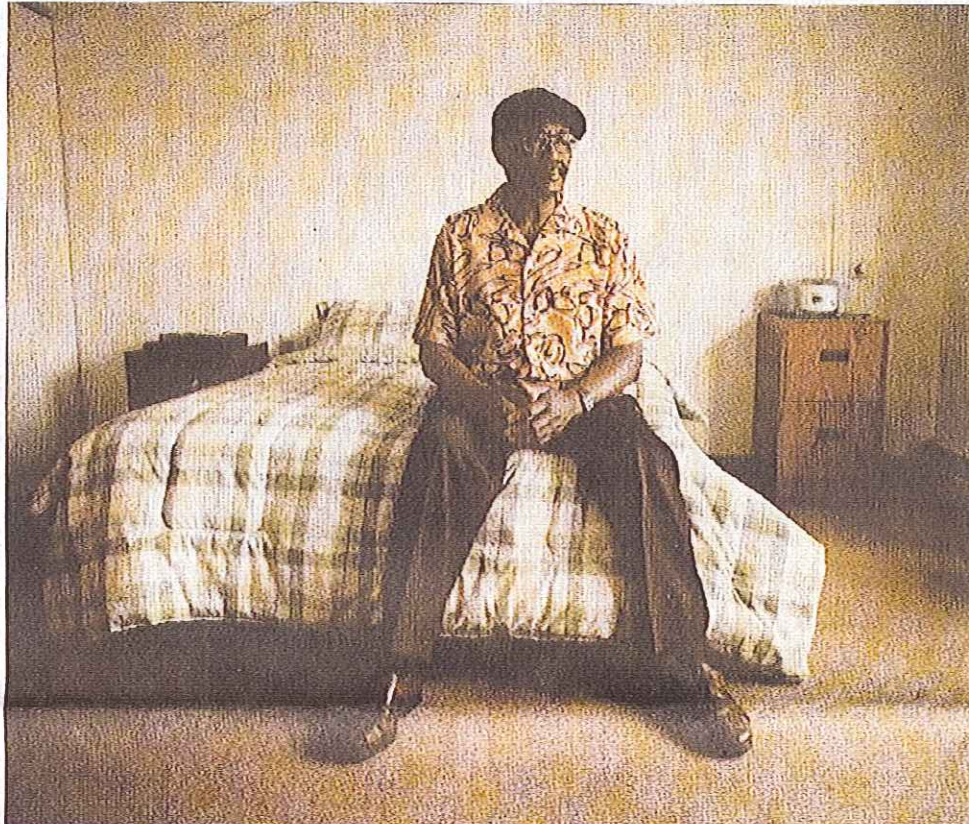


'It's a tragedy to lose where you are at. You know you are not going to have a place to stay. You don't know where your next meal will come from.'

—John Stovall, who has a new place to live at age 69



Tribune photo by José M. Osorio

After years of sleeping on the streets, John Stovall, 69, moved into senior housing. Stovall said he had been a working father who helped raise five children, but he lost his job and eventually became homeless at age 61.

Number of homeless over age 50 rising, study finds

Increase spurs agencies to look at new strategies

By Lolly Bovean
TRIBUNE REPORTER

For most of his life, John Stovall remodeled houses, supported his wife and raised five children on the West Side.

But after decades of stability, Stovall began struggling with alcoholism, lost his job and his family and wound up homeless at 61.

"It's a tragedy to lose where you are at," he said. "You know you are not going to have a place to stay. You

don't know where your next meal will come from."

Stovall's story is like that of hundreds of older residents in the Chicago region who end up homeless because they are too old and ill-equipped to find stable work and too young to qualify for senior citizens benefits, experts say.

The number of homeless people over 50 is steadily increasing and causing new challenges for agencies that serve the population, according to a report to be released Thursday.

From 2001 to 2006 there was a 26 percent increase in older residents seeking help from social agencies

in the Chicago region, the report said.

The study, conducted by the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness with Loyola University's Center for Urban Research and Learning, offers a glimpse at a community of people who can easily become chronically homeless because of the scarce resources available to them.

"There is a great divide between the homeless world and the world of aging," said Nancy Radner, chief executive officer of the alliance. "There are a lot of things going on

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in the world of aging that could help the homeless. One goal is to bring these two worlds together."

The study came after officials in agencies that serve the poor and homeless began reporting that more older people were seeking help, Radner said.

For nine months, officials looked at the issue and learned that 39 percent of people who end up homeless after they turn 50 said that they lost their job and couldn't find another and that they struggled with alcoholism. In addition, many end up homeless after an accident or an acute illness puts them out of work.

Though there are agencies that help people find work and secure housing, officials reported that they struggled to assist the older age group, Radner said. Some in that group have special medical needs, their skills are dated and they are not welcomed back into the workforce. They don't qualify for much aid, don't have retirement savings and often have nowhere to turn.

"A majority of these people are homeless for the first time in their 40s. This was a huge surprise to us," Radner said.

"For a number of these folks, they were, as a lot of people are in Chicago and elsewhere, precariously housed and employed to begin with. They worked jobs that didn't necessarily pay a living wage.

"What happens is that as they age, there is one thing that pushes them over the edge into homelessness."

Although the study aims to shed light on Chicago's aging homeless population, some say that concern about older, troubled residents slipping into homelessness is not new.

The average homeless person loses stability in midlife, said Charles Hoch, a professor of urban planning at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

The increased population of homeless people over 50 also could reflect the overall increased population of peo-

ple in that age range, he said.

"You expect the number to increase," he said. "There are a lot of people in that age cohort—and there is economic hardship—then there are more people that will experience the problem."

Hoch said the report's findings should not be dismissed but must be viewed in context.

"There are a lot of people who are poor, and they are finding some type of arrangement to keep shelter. When a crisis happens, if they have other problems, the most notable ones being addiction and medical disabilities, then those effects are even more intense."

Brenda Formsett found herself floating among friends' houses and on the streets after she was evicted in 1999.

Her husband died after 22 years of marriage, and she had no way to pay the bills or make ends meet. Depressed and still mourning, she started abusing drugs. She was 49.

"All my life I was a housewife and a mother," she said. "No one could have ever told me that I'd end up with no home, no clothes, nothing. My husband was a Chicago firefighter for 17 years and for me to wind up homeless..."

With no work experience, Formsett said she couldn't find a job. Now, she is in subsidized housing and depends on government assistance for food. It works for now, she said, but she doesn't know what she's going to do for the long term.

"You get to a certain age, if you haven't been stable when you were young, you can lose your job or anything can happen and you can wind up homeless," she said.

For Stovall, alcoholism pushed him over, he said. He's 69 and after years of sleeping on the streets, he moved into senior housing about a month ago because of assistance from an agency.

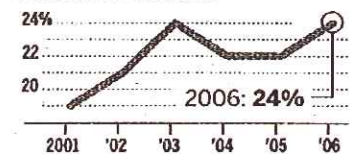
"I'm going grocery shopping. I've got a few pieces of furniture. I've got towels, stove, a fridge," he said. "I sit here and admire my house. It's been such a long time."

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Tracking city's homeless age 50 and up

The 23 Chicago-area agencies that serve the homeless report an increase in people 50 and older seeking help, according to a new study. Many said they were homeless because they lost their job, fell ill or public assistance was unavailable.

Homeless aged 50+ served by Chicago-area agencies
Percent of all clients



PROFILE OF HOMELESS 50-64 IN CHICAGO AREA

Gender: 76% male

Race: 63% African-American

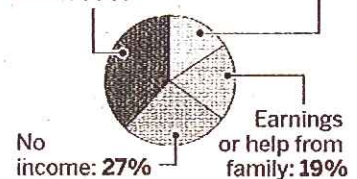
Education: 59% graduated from high school

Average time spent homeless: Just under 2 years

Employment: 24% were employed, mainly part time or as day labor

Sources of income:

Gov't assistance alone: 38% Gov't and non-gov't assistance: 16%



SOURCES: University Chicago Center for Urban Research and Learning, Study conducted by the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness.

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