



# "I WAS HOMELESS"

At least 1.3 million homeless children live in the United States. Kevin Liu was one of them.

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**AS YOU READ,  
THINK ABOUT:**

**What challenges do the  
homeless face?**

**“W**here do  
you live?”  
This is the  
question

that filled 11-year-old Kevin Liu with dread. How could he answer? Sometimes he would change the subject. Other times he would give a vague reply. A few times he flat-out lied. But he never, ever told his friends the full truth: He didn't have a home.

Until fifth grade, Kevin lived with his parents and his younger brother, Ka-ren, in Chinatown, a bustling neighborhood in downtown New York City famous for its vibrant Chinese culture, hopping markets, and delicious restaurants. Kevin's parents ran a successful shop that sold groceries and candies and had arcade games for kids. Kevin and Ka-ren helped out, working the cash register and making change for customers. The family rented a modest studio apartment above the store.

At the time, Kevin didn't think of himself as happy or comfortable. Life just seemed normal.

Then, just before Kevin started sixth grade, everything changed.

One day, the landlord told Kevin's family they had to leave—immediately. The building was being renovated, and they had to go. Locks were placed on the family's shop and apartment, with

the family's belongings still inside.

Legally, landlords can't just kick people out of their homes. A landlord must first go to court, where a judge decides if **eviction** is allowed. What's more, landlords are required to give renters a reasonable amount of time to move. But Kevin's parents spoke little English, and they did not know their rights. The idea of taking their landlord to court seemed **daunting** and expensive. And so in one devastating day, they lost their home and their business.

They had no money, no jobs, and nowhere to go.

### **Homelessness in America**

In the United States, more than 630,000 people are homeless on any given day—and those are just the ones we know about. Experts say that there are likely millions more. Most of these men, women, and children probably don't look

the way you imagine. They are not unwashed or wearing worn-out clothing or standing on the side of the road with a cardboard sign. In fact, you may see a homeless person every day and have no idea. The majority of homeless people look just like you.

Many paths can lead to homelessness: unemployment, mental illness, an unexpected sickness. These are problems almost anyone can relate to. Do you know someone who lost a job? How about someone who got sick and had an expensive hospital stay? Hopefully, the people you know had someone they could turn to when they needed help, such as a friend or relative.

But what happens if someone does not have that support structure? One crisis can quickly spiral out of control, causing that person to fall behind on housing payments or become unable to pay at all. For Kevin's parents, the crisis was getting unfairly evicted. They didn't have enough money to rent a new apartment in New York City, where renters are generally required to make a large payment—usually thousands of dollars—before they can move in.

Experiencing a crisis is just one part of the picture of homelessness. Ultimately, the number one cause of homelessness is a lack of affordable housing—that is,



## ESSAY

# Are We Doing Enough?

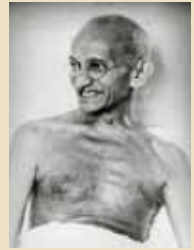
**T**he Indian civil-rights leader Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The measure of a civilization is how it treats its weakest members.”

How do we in the United States measure up?

Back in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was widely believed that the poor had brought their misfortune upon themselves. When people lost their jobs or got sick, they had to rely on their families to help them. If their families couldn’t—or wouldn’t—assist, these people often wound up on the streets.

Attitudes and policies began to change after the Great Depression in the 1930s. In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson declared a “war on poverty,” and the government created dozens of programs for Americans in need. These programs, which are still in place today, range from school meals, which feed millions of kids, to Medicare, which provides health care to senior citizens. There are also hundreds of private organizations that rely on donations to help the poor.

America has a far stronger **safety net** than many nations. But are we doing enough? Consider this: Of the richest 35 nations in the world, the U.S. has the second-highest rate of child poverty (after Romania), and one in six Americans lives in poverty. At the same time, there is growing debate about whether we



houses and apartments that middle- and lower-income families can comfortably afford. Over the past decade, the cost of homes in major American cities has skyrocketed. As a result, the number of homeless families in big cities has risen drastically. Since 2002, the number of homeless families in New York has increased by 73 percent, according to the Coalition for the Homeless. In Washington, D.C., the number of homeless families has doubled in the past five years.

## The Ordeal

Kevin’s family eventually moved into a **shelter** in downtown Manhattan (and were able to retrieve their belongings). They received a tiny

room with bunk beds; the bathroom was shared with the other families on their floor.

They were relieved to have a place to stay and free food to eat. But their ordeal was just beginning.

Being homeless is a frightening

Today, one in six Americans lives in poverty.



and **dehumanizing** experience, characterized by uncertainty and trauma. Homeless people must struggle to survive with almost nothing. They tend to be undernourished. And they are frequent victims of robbery, even

in shelters. Being homeless is particularly hard on kids. Studies show that homeless children are under constant stress. They get sick frequently, have a hard time in school, and, like Kevin, tend to feel a deep sense of shame and isolation

should cut back on government programs for the poor. Some say too many Americans rely on the government for help. A lot of assistance programs have already been cut back.

What would Gandhi say to this? And what do you think?

from their classmates. Life can be very lonely for kids in shelters. They can't simply invite their friends over after school to play video games or do homework.

Homelessness was certainly stressful for Kevin. His grades began to drop. The shelter was noisy, hot, and dirty. (With so many people passing through, even the most well-maintained shelters are difficult to keep clean.) The food, Kevin says, was "disgusting"; there was no place

for residents to cook their own meals. Food poisoning was a constant worry. Kevin's mom would order inexpensive takeout whenever she could—until she got a crockpot, which was technically against the rules.

Every time Kevin came to the shelter after school, he had to go past security guards. Even going to the bathroom was a horrifying experience. There was no privacy. The showers and toilet stalls were all in the same room. Often, Kevin

found excrement in the showers or smeared on the walls.

Then some of the kids began picking on him. While he was in the shower, they would turn off the lights or open the curtain. "I can still hear them laughing in my head," Kevin remembers. One boy in particular tried to make Kevin's life miserable, **belittling** Kevin and even going so far as to demand money from Kevin's mom.

"He'd make fun of me because there were only two Asian families in the whole shelter,"


Kevin says. "He'd say, 'Hey, Jackie Chan,' or 'Hey, Jet Li.'" Wisely, Kevin chose to ignore him as best he could, focusing instead on the day his family would get to leave.

But as the months dragged on, turning to years, Kevin began to fear that his family would never again have a home of their own.

Kevin's family wasn't alone. Many families in the shelter system end up staying much longer than they intend. "It's very hard to get out of homelessness," says Megan Hustings, a spokesperson for the National Coalition for the Homeless. "Especially in the bigger cities, trying to save up for rent when you're working in a **minimum wage** job is very difficult."

## Homeless, Not Hopeless

Across the U.S., many communities do reach out to help their most needy. Food drives and clothing donations can make a big difference. Several nonprofit groups, like the international charity Habitat for Humanity, build affordable housing, while other groups, like the HOPE program in New York, help those in poverty find better-paying jobs.

It was through one of these groups that Kevin found a glimmer of hope. In seventh grade, after he had been living in the shelter for more than a year, Kevin started going to an after-school program called Bound for Success. The program was run by the Coalition for the Homeless. 

## HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA A SNAPSHOT

20

out of every 10,000 people in the U.S. are homeless.

133

out of every 10,000 people in Washington, D.C., are homeless. That's the highest rate of homelessness in the U.S.



243,627

homeless persons are reported to be living on the streets, in cars, or in abandoned buildings.

(The true number is impossible to count; there are likely many, many more.)

29

states reported an increase in homelessness from 2011 to 2012.

SOURCE: "THE STATE OF HOMELESSNESS IN AMERICA 2013"  
BY THE NATIONAL ALLIANCE TO END HOMELESSNESS

“It was a quiet place where I could do my homework or play music or do arts and crafts,” he says. “It was an escape from all the craziness of being in a cramped shelter with people I didn’t know or like.” The program, which serves 30 homeless children at a time, offers free tutoring, field trips, and above all, a safe place to hang out.

Thanks to the Coalition, Kevin’s grades began to improve. He even made a few friends at the shelter.

But he couldn’t bring himself to tell his school friends the truth. “I felt like I could never truly be myself and open up to my friends because I carried around this secret,” he says.

### A New Beginning

Just before Kevin started high school, he finally got the news he’d been so desperately waiting for. After three long and difficult years in the shelter, his family had

been given an apartment through a program that helps needy families with their rent.

“When I found out we were moving, I was so relieved and excited that I practically jumped up and down,” Kevin recalls. “We have two rooms now, one bathroom that we don’t have to share with strangers, and our own kitchen, so we can cook our own food. It’s so much cleaner than the shelter, and it’s so nice to have privacy again.”

It would be years, though, before Kevin let go of the shame he felt during his time in the shelter. When he turned 17 this past April, he decided to confide in his friend Jason.

“I thought, ‘If he turns his back on me, then he isn’t a true friend,’” Kevin explains.

It turns out that Jason was a true friend. He was shocked that Kevin had carried around such a secret for so many years, but he didn’t treat Kevin any differently. The conversation went so well that Kevin began telling more of his friends.

Today, Kevin is doing better than ever. He is a senior in high school. His mom has a job as an aid in a school cafeteria (though his father is still looking for work). Kevin dreams of going to college and becoming an actor. He spends his free time volunteering at the after-school program that helped him so much when he was in middle school.

“I want to help other kids who are going through the same thing as I did,” Kevin explains. “Sometimes I’ll help them with their homework or play basketball with them. I hope they look at me and see how well I’m doing now and think: I can do that too.” ●



### WRITING CONTEST

Think about the state of homelessness in America. What challenges do the homeless face? In what ways does society help and how could we do more? Write two to three paragraphs answering these questions. Use text evidence from ‘I Was Homeless,’ the infographic, and the essay to support your ideas. Send your response to [HOMELESSNESS CONTEST](#). Five winners will each receive a copy of *Money Hungry* by Sharon G. Flake. See page 2 for details.

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