

Home Is Where the Heart Is



Breakin' It Down

The number of homeless people on the streets of the United States grows every year despite our country's wealth. Officials estimate that about 3.5 million people, 1.35 million of them children, are likely to experience homelessness in a given year (Urban Institute 2000). It's hard to face these statistics — and even harder to face the people they represent. What can be done?

HERstory

The "Home Is Where the Heart Is" Interest Project is the direct result of an IP created by Abby, Katie, Rebekah, and Stephanie for their Girl Scout Silver Award Project. Their project was later adopted by the Girl Scouts–Seal of Ohio council as a "Council's Own" IP.

You've Got MAD Skills

The sincerity and goodwill of their Interest Project is mirrored in Girl Scouts of the USA's "Home Is Where the Heart Is," so that teenage girls like you across the country can:

- Raise local awareness of homelessness and increase efforts to aid the homeless community
- Understand the reality of homelessness through interviews and volunteering
- Make connections with community resources
- Explore careers in community services

Helpful Links

There are several organizations that would be helpful for researching and doing the activities in this IP:

- National Alliance to End Homelessness (www.naeh.org)
- National Coalition for the Homeless (www.nationalhomeless.org)
- National Low Income Housing Coalition (www.nlihc.org)
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (www.hud.gov)

Important!

First complete the REQUIRED activity and one LEARN activity before moving on to the DO and SHARE activities. If you feel uncomfortable, you have the option of doing the background work and not doing the personal interaction. If you decide to engage in personal interaction at a homeless shelter, make sure that when visiting, **you are always with an adult.**

Some things to keep in mind when visiting a homeless shelter are:

- Smile
- Make eye contact
- Bring something for the residents
- Talk to them as you would anyone else

Some suggestions for items ("icebreakers") to bring with you may be:

- Homemade treats
- Girls Scout Cookies
- Candy,
- Stationary with stamps
- Homemade holiday cards
- Anything you have collected such as clothing, food, etc.

When talking to residents, know the difference between questioning and probing (investigators, scientists, and lawyers "probe"). Don't ask questions you aren't prepared to hear the answer to, including questions about abuse (drug, physical, or otherwise)—unlike social workers, you are not trained to handle sensitive topics. Consider questions like those suggested in activity No. 2 of the "DO" category.

Need Help?

No problem. Read the [Intro](#) before diving into "Home Is Where the Heart Is." Just want a quick refresher on what to do? Okay, in order to earn any of these Interest Projects:

- Do the one REQUIRED activity
- Do ONE activity of your choice from each of the THREE categories (LEARN, DO, SHARE)
- Design and do ONE activity of [YOUR OWN](#)
- Create a short [REFLECTION](#) after you've completed [all of the activities](#)

Food for Thought! Often, an activity in the "LEARN" category will help you build a skill that you'll have the chance to try in the "DO" category and then share in the "SHARE" category. Make connections between the "steps" when planning which activities you'll do. For an example of a skill-building connection, check out the third activity of each "Home Is Where the Heart Is" category.

Home Is Where the Heart Is



Required: Social agencies like the United Way and the Salvation Army provide assistance to the homeless. Interview a social worker at one of these agencies or a local shelter to find out about homelessness in your community. Ask them:

1. What is the population like (how many, ages, background, history, reasons)?
2. What services are available for homeless families?
3. What does the shelter provide and what is their rate of success in helping people get back on their feet?
4. Is there a limitation for a resident's stay at the shelter?
5. What are some obstacles the staff faces?
6. What does the staff see as the main reasons for homelessness in the area?
7. What can be done to impact a change at the local, state, or national level to address the causes of homelessness?
8. What can Girl Scouts do to help the shelter?

LEARN

1. What if your family experienced a crisis that caused you to become homeless? Make a list of the things you would bring with you to a homeless shelter (assuming everything you bring has to fit in a backpack). Remember that you still have to go to school. Call a local homeless shelter to see what things are provided and allowed. What things would be in your backpack now? Next, imagine that your family can't get to a shelter and make a list of places in your community that you would sleep. What things would be in your backpack now? Discuss the list you made with your family. What would happen to the stuff you can't take (like your bike, pets, etc.)?
2. What does it take to work with the homeless? Interview a member of a homeless shelter or emergency shelter's staff. Find out what careers are involved in working at a homeless shelter. What made them want to work in their field? What kind of training, education, and experience is required? What is the salary range for the position? Are there other personal rewards for working in a profession that helps other people?
3. What are the underlying causes of homelessness? For adults, it's often a problem of losing jobs and then trying to find new ones. For kids, many homeless youth are runaways and/or in foster care. In fact, each year, federally funded runaway and homeless youth programs provide street outreach, emergency shelter, and transitional living services to an estimated 600,000 youth. What kinds of services and counseling are provided for youth like these in your area? What are some factors that hold homeless people back from moving out of shelters and getting jobs? What are the unemployment rates in your city or state? What specific economic factors have contributed to the homeless problem in your city or state? What skills are most often required by employers? Do homeless shelters provide these skills or job training? What job training services are provided by your community? A local homeless shelter, department of job and family services, or department of rehabilitation are good sources of information.
4. Women with homes and jobs currently earn 76 cents for every dollar that men make. Imagine how hard life is for women without homes and jobs. Are there more women in shelters than men? If so, why? Why would it be harder for a woman than a man to be in a homeless shelter? What are the dangers women face in shelters? What happens with their children? Interview a staff member from a local homeless shelter to find these answers. A community liaison with the local police department would also be a good source of information.

DO

1. Celebrate a holiday with a homeless shelter. You can make Valentine or holiday cards, give holiday gifts, pass out candy at Halloween, hand out flags at Fourth of July, or cook a special meal or treats. Keep in mind that during the Christmas and Thanksgiving holidays, many homeless programs have more volunteers than needed so sign up early.
2. Talk to a woman, man, or youth in a program/residence who is willing to share, who lives or has lived in a shelter (**coordinate this conversation with the director of a local homeless shelter or program**). Spend time with this person and interview them about their daily life. Empathize by asking questions and listening. Ask if they have children. Find out what their life was like before going to a shelter. Talk to them about what they normally do each day. For example, do they have a job? How do they get what they need? Find out what life was like before going to a shelter. Ask about their income vs. average cost for a modest apartment. What was the reason they became homeless? Remember: Make sure that when visiting, **you are always with an adult in a supervised residence** (not in the streets!).

3. What does a social/case worker who is involved with a homeless shelter do? What education, training, and experience do they need in order to help others? Contact a local college or university and talk to someone in the advisement office about learning to become a social/case worker. What are their degree requirements; what classes would you take? What is the difference between applicable degrees (like MSW, BSW, psychology, family counseling, etc.)? What classes should you take in high school to prepare for majoring in social work in college? If you can, shadow a social/case worker for a day.

4. What if you became homeless tomorrow? With the help of your guidance counselor or a representative from your local department of job and family services, make a list of the jobs you could do based on your current level of skills. Ask about the starting salaries these job pay. Research the costs of affordable housing in your area. Do the jobs you're now qualified for pay enough money to get an apartment? What about food and clothing? Commit to signing up for one class at school that will help expand your skill set (like typing, shorthand, auto mechanics, graphic design, and agriculture).

SHARE

1. Talk to the director or volunteer coordinator of a family shelter in your community. The children there will have more social and emotional needs than the adults. Ask what you can do to help and how you can volunteer your time to work with the kids.
2. Share what you have learned about homelessness in your community with a group in or outside of Girl Scouts. You can share the story of a homeless man, woman, or kid you spoke with, or why a social worker you met chose their career. You can also share a personal story about your experiences while earning this IP. Include possible reasons why homelessness is a problem in your area and some things others can do to help. Sharing what you have learned can be spoken, written, or illustrated in a group setting as a presentation or as a submission for your school or local newspaper.
3. Start a food, clothing, school supplies, or toiletries drive for a local shelter. You may also want to consider an art supply drive to get craft items for the children living in a homeless or women's shelter. Before doing a drive, contact the shelter to find out what their needs are. If their needs can be met by doing a food drive, learn about the food pyramid (www.mypyramid.gov), dietary requirements for people who are of different religions or are diabetic, and what your local shelter needs. If a clothing drive would be most helpful (many shelters do not have sufficient storage), ask what kind of clothing is needed (size, style, etc.) and base your drive on their needs. Launder, sort, and package the clothing to take to the shelter. Offer to help pick out clothes to fit their needs (like clothes for job interviews, work, and school).
4. Go to a homeless shelter and spend a day with the residents doing anything they require such as cleaning, cooking, repairs, etc. You could also volunteer at a soup kitchen.