



# Homeless in Montgomery: How do they survive?

**Kym Klass, Montgomery Advertiser** Published 2:01 p.m. CT Jan. 26, 2018 | Updated 3:55 p.m. CT Jan. 26, 2018



(Photo: Albert Cesare / Advertiser)

Alexander Matthews carries a clear plastic bag of empty aluminum cans over his right shoulder along Lower Wetumpka Road, when a van pulls up to ask whether he is homeless. [Fullscreen](#)

He pauses slightly, turns his head when he answers, and **Friendship Mission helps take a count of the homeless**

The 46-year-old has been homeless for a couple of years since "after my divorce ... a hell of a story. After my divorce, it just shook me up. And right after that, my mom had died. And that shook me up. And my father died. I quit caring. I got to that point.

"But ... I'm still praying."

The woman in the van, Tammy Middleton, is the executive director of the Friendship Mission, a homeless shelter which houses men in west Montgomery and women and children in the north side of the city.

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It is Wednesday morning, and Middleton drives around looking for homeless as part of an annual "point in time count" through the [Mid-Alabama Coalition for the Homeless \(https://midalhomeless.org/\)](https://midalhomeless.org/), which is designed to find who lives on the streets or in abandoned homes.

Data is collected on their age, race, disabilities — mental or physical. Their birth date, and where they slept the night before. After homeless are interviewed, they are provided with a lunch, blanket and gender-specific hygiene packs filled with items including a toothbrush and toothpaste.

While MACH conducted a count the evening before, Middleton said that in the daytime, "you can see what you're pulling up on. You can see if they're of an aggressive nature, if they're talking to themselves, that type of thing.

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"Some are smiling. Some ask what we want. In the daylight, as a volunteer doing this, you feel safe. At night, you would never put three women in a van to go out and do this."

Matthews was willing to talk.

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He fell into a deep depression after his marriage ended and his parents passed away.

"That's hard," he said. "That's a hard pill to swallow. When you're that far on top of life, and everything starts coming down on you and you've got no answers. It hit me. It hits some people, and some, it don't.

"It's like a jinx or something, following the same people."

## Homeless: 'There are definitely more.'

The "point in time count" allows MACH to understand what work they have to do and the resources needed in order to serve the homeless population, said its executive director, Nancy Fitzpatrick.

Of this week's homeless count, she said, "there are definitely more. And I think one of the saddest things that I've experienced is seeing a homeless person with their bags and down by the water and who wouldn't admit it.

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"They wouldn't cooperate with being counted. I don't know if it is pride. We came across abandoned houses ... they would hide; they would not come out. That is probably the downside of the evening for me."

On a single night in January 2015 in the United States, 564,708 people were experiencing homelessness, according to the [National Alliance to End Homelessness](https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/) (https://endhomelessness.org/homelessness-in-america/homelessness-statistics/state-of-homelessness-report/) 2016 State of Homelessness in America, meaning they were sleeping outside or in an emergency shelter or transitional housing program.

During last year's count, MACH recorded numbers including 24 chronically homeless, 120 who have a severe mental illness, 46 who are victims of domestic violence, 40 veterans, 108 who are families with dependent children, 38 who are chronic substance abusers, and three who live with HIV/AIDS. Buy Photo 



**John House, a homeless man, speaks to Lakesea Butler, Friendship Mission case manager, for her to fill out paperwork for for the Mid Alabama Coalition for the Homeless count of homeless on Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018, in Montgomery, Ala. (Photo: Albert Cesare / Advertiser)**

"We counted 68 on the street last January," Fitzpatrick said of unsheltered homeless. "We know there are more than that. When they're asking you for the number in a grant proposal, that's what you have to put down ... the people who cooperated with us. But that number is not representative of the people living on the streets."

They are mothers with children who don't come out at night because they're afraid of their children being taken away. They are the homeless who are afraid to give any personal information because they have warrants and are afraid they will be turned over to the police.

Some, Fitzpatrick said, deal with some level of paranoia.

"They may think some people trying to help them are spies," she said. "We have an obligation to protect the information that we take."

Still, there remain the homeless who prefer living on the streets: they have no support from family or friends; they don't like confined spaces; they have substance abuse issues; or they don't want to follow the rules of shelters.

"The biggest thing I see outside of lack of support is mental illness," Fitzpatrick said. "Unfortunately, we don't have the amount of resources, mental health professionals, to make sure the people who are mentally challenged are on their meds. Or to administer it. That's a real issue."

## From Vietnam to Mobile Highway

Vietnam veteran Cleve Savage sat at a gas station on Mobile Highway, holding a sign asking for help.

It was his fifth month living on the streets — specifically, in an empty building along the highway with a sleeping bag and blanket to keep him warm. Raised in Birmingham, he moved to Montgomery from Mobile in September after an argument with his girlfriend.

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Cleve Savage holds up a sign giving information to Tammy Middleton, Friendship Mission executive director, so she can fill out paperwork for the Mid Alabama Coalition for the Homeless count of homeless on Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018, in Montgomery, Ala. (Photo: Albert Cesare / Advertiser)

"I was so mad I got a bus ticket and got on a bus," he said.

While he receives a few dollars from passersby or customers, he said he used to walk to the Friendship Mission for dinner, but his legs began hurting too bad to continue.

Savage was in the hospital with pneumonia for a week in November but can't afford the prescriptions given to him.

"When my check gets started next month, I'll go back to the doctor and see if I can get them renewed," he said.

Asked whether he becomes scared sleeping in a vacant building, he chuckled, and answered: "I'm 67. What is there to be scared of? No, I'm not. The only thing left for me to do is have a heart attack and die."

Less than an hour after being interviewed by Middleton, though, Savage was picked up by the men's shelter and at least through Friday, had shelter.

## Where the homeless sleep

They have begun sleeping at overpasses.

Behind stores, abandoned houses. Behind dumpsters. Inside car washes.

Middleton checks the interstate, such as on Ann Street and all the interstate exchanges.

"You may find some who are just out walking and staying in abandoned houses," Middleton said. "We saw a group (Tuesday night) at (a hotel) and you would look at them and initially think they're staying at the hotel. But then we realized they were standing in the breezeway in the very back. And so we found out that ... some of them were homeless, and some of them were not."

"A lot of time at night, they will burrow behind the dumpsters because it blocks the wind for them. Typically, people don't really hang out at dumpsters."



**Dean Best, a homeless man, speaks to Lakeesa Butler, Friendship Mission case manager, for her to fill out paperwork for for the Mid Alabama Coalition for the Homeless count of homeless on Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018, in Montgomery, Ala. (Photo: Albert Cesare / Advertiser)**

Car washes, Middleton said, don't only provide shelter. It also provides a place to rinse off.

"Sometimes they can turn the water on in there," she said. "We know for a fact some of them have used the water to take a shower in. Some just try to get in there because they are closed in and they can't visibly be seen. And that's their big thing at night, because then people can't call the police on them."

Tammy Brassell, 47, sleeps on porches.

Outside of the Friendship Mission on Chisholm Street, Brassell said she turned to drugs and alcohol after her grandmother passed a few years ago, and began going from "pillar to post," or house-to-house, at night to sleep.

Sober now for three years and nine months, she has stayed at the women's shelter, the Salvation Army, and also at a shelter on Patterson Road. She lives with high blood pressure, diabetes and arthritis in her hands, knees and feet.

Asked how she handles it all, she said, "I prayed. I also went to a couple of rehabs, but most of all, prayer."

It is the women Middleton said are found more in the daytime hours.

"You don't find a lot of women at night," she said. "Especially anybody who has kids. They'll go stay in abandoned houses. These kids, a lot of times they're not in school. I would say about 75 percent are in school. They may be way behind in school ... two or three grades behind."

The warmer the nights, Middleton said, the harder it is to find homeless because they're not so cold that they have to be moving so much,

But when they're not moving in the cold, they can sometimes be found in the crook of an overpass. Recently, four men were found on the Southern Bypass.

"Three of them were new to Montgomery," said Middleton. "Two of them hitchhiked and one rode a train. They'd never heard of the Friendship Mission, but none of them would come at this point. One guy is in his 40s, and he just likes being outside."

Being outside is just what some prefer.

"At (Highway) 231 (and the Northern Bypass), there was a veteran and he's been there probably close to a year. We've picked him up before and brought him to the shelter," Middleton said.

"But he has severe PTSD, and he can't stay inside. He comes in, and he panics and leaves and walks all the way back."

## For better or for worse

Jonathan and Rachel Carswell have been together for 18 years and married since 2003.

Where they live on Yarbrough Street, they don't have running water or electricity and the ceiling to their kitchen has caved in. There is wiring they can't afford to fix and they use extra blankets the warmth of two cats and each other to stay warm at night.



Lakeesa Butler, right, Friendship Mission case manager, fills out paperwork on Jonathan Carswell for the Mid Alabama Coalition for the Homeless count of homeless as Tammy Middleton, Friendship Mission executive director, gives Rachel Carswell a blanket on Wednesday, Jan. 24, 2018, in Montgomery, Ala. (Photo: Albert Cesare / Advertiser)

The \$100 they pay for rent gives them a roof over their heads. But they won't seek help through a homeless shelter because they don't want to lose what little they possess.

In the past three years, the Carswells, who are both 45 years old, have been considered homeless three times. Every day they walk.

"I have to do something to keep my health up," Jonathan Carswell said. "I have osteoporosis arthritis. My joints are deteriorating. I can't let my muscles get weak because then they will deteriorate faster."

#### **For more information**

To learn more about the Mid-Alabama Coalition for the Homeless, visit online at <https://midalhomeless.org> (<https://midalhomeless.org>) or call 261-6182.

To learn more about the Friendship Mission, visit online at [www.friendshipmission.org](http://www.friendshipmission.org) (<http://www.friendshipmission.org>) or call 356-6412. The men's shelter is located at 3561 Mobile Highway, and the women's shelter is located at 312 Chisholm Street.

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